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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Richard Rorty's Liberalism

by

© **Matthew Stephens**

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 1994

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To realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.

---Joseph Schumpeter

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Richard Rorty's Liberalism* submitted by Matthew Hylton Stephens in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Dr. Catherine Wilson (Supervisor)

Dr. Wesley E. Cooper (Committee Member)

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Dr. Don Carmichael (Committee Member)

Oct. 6, 1994

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I was fortunate enough to meet with Richard Rorty during the composition of this thesis, and while we did not discus the details of my research, I was grateful for the opportunity to put directly to him questions which had been on my mind for some time. I first encountered Professor Rorty's work through reading *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* in the winter of 1992, and the excitement this generated was, I think, the determining factor in my decision to attend graduate school. It was his writing that convinced this mildly cynical reader that philosophy had a future, and my determination to entwine this future with my own owes no small debt to the writer who is the subject of this thesis.

Significantly closer to my heart and home, I would like to thank my parents for their unending emotional (and financial!) support during these past two years and beyond. Much of what I picture to myself when I write about virtues such as toleration, integrity, and fairness, I first saw in them, as I continue to see them today. Writing about morality begins and ends with what they taught--and continue to teach me. They are two people of whom I shall never cease to be not only grateful, but unspeakably proud.

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Edmonton, Alberta
October 1994

Abstract

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity is Richard Rorty's most sustained and coherent attempt to examine contemporary western political culture and the role of professional philosophy therein. Building upon his earlier work in epistemology, Rorty argues for the irrelevance of philosophy to political life, and his method of so doing calls traditional conceptions of philosophy, argumentation and morality into question. Rorty feels the philosopher who attempts to provide 'foundations' for liberalism is misguided and badly serves the liberal polity in which he lives. An exegesis of Rorty's views may yield valuable new perspectives on the methodology and ultimately of the value of traditional debates within political philosophy, aesthetics and moral philosophy. A critique of Rorty's position is (on one reading) a starting point for further progress, whether political, philosophical, or both.

Accordingly, this project begins by explaining in detail Rorty's views on the relation between philosophy and politics, including an consideration of how his political philosophy is derived from his earlier work in other areas. Chapter one explores Rorty's philosophical justification of his views and the relation of such justification to his project as a whole. The stress on individual character development, and the efficacy of redescribing problems in order to minimize the practical effect of philosophical problems are also explored. The second chapter focuses on the separation of public from private moral projects; the potential value of philosophical, religious and poetic reflection are each explored in turn. A detailed account of Rorty's underdeveloped notion of progress is also made, in the hopes of displaying the overall consistency of Rorty's thought.

The essay concludes with a consideration of possible lines of criticism, based upon a point of view strongly sympathetic to Rorty's overall aims. In a sense, some of his particular claims are criticized by appeal to his more general goals, in the hopes of creating a more coherent and viable picture of liberalism. The major point of contention revolves around Rorty's conception of human fulfilment: it will be argued that his picture of the good life as an autonomous one is both unattainable and inconsistent with the more pragmatic aspects of his political thought. While his separation of public and private moral projects remains a valuable contribution to the contemporary debate, Rorty's specific ideas as to what those projects should involve remains deficient.

Preface

This is an attempt to clarify and explore Richard Rorty's writings about liberalism. Accordingly, the emphasis is on elucidation rather than criticism, and this may seem to some to be a rather unambitious philosophical project. However, it is my feeling that this is the activity most in keeping with the spirit of Rorty's picture of liberalism and of philosophy. It is a view deeply indebted to Wittgenstein, one which has become known as a 'therapeutic' model of philosophy: one seeks to rid oneself of the habit of thinking about useless or unsolvable questions. I think Rorty would be hostile to any all-embracing definition of philosophy, but if pressed to describe the intentions behind publishing a book like *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, I believe he would reach for something like the above description.

Rorty frequently refers to (what he considers beneficial) philosophy as 'edifying', and I think this is in part to avoid the more sullen qualities of Wittgenstein's description. It is also to avoid a quietism many readers find in Wittgenstein, for Rorty does not believe things should be 'passed over in silence', as Wittgenstein councils in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.* Rorty does believe in engaging in discourse on matters moral, aesthetic and political; but he does share with Wittgenstein the conviction that 'merely philosophical' problems can be circumvented by clarifying one's point of view. This includes clarifying one's view of the relation of philosophical and political activity. This forms the heart of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*: the detachment of philosophical problems from political action. I take this book to be central to his description of liberalism because it is his most sustained and detailed attempt to talk about the relevance of philosophy to politics, and I have found that his views can best be understood by a careful reading of this book with supporting references to his contemporary essays on liberalism and subjects expounded upon throughout *Contingency*. Accordingly, mine is an attempt to penetrate Rorty's thinking about liberalism, taking this book as central to his picture of political philosophy. It is a picture that involves his so-called 'anti-foundationalism' that has made him such a controversial and misunderstood figure, and it calls our attention beyond recent political philosophy to the broader history of the discipline, and of modern Western culture in general. I will do my very best not to stray in such boundless territory.

If one were to enquire as to the spirit that lies behind this undertaking, I would answer that it was the spirit of elucidation--such as one can find in Wittgenstein's writings. To look at the structure of this essay, one may see (to borrow one more of Wittgenstein's terms) a 'family resemblance' between this essay and the book it is about: it is similar in its three-part structure, but this suited me because it allowed me to say all that I wanted to say; the resemblance is mostly coincidental. If one were also to ask what was the purpose of writing a preface, I would say that it was precisely the thoughts contained in this last paragraph: it is to present the author's (hopefully relevant) consideration of his own work. In the spirit of pragmatism: if these pages are useful, they will have fulfilled their purpose.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One: "Cruelty is the worst thing we do" 7

1.0 Introductory Remarks 7
1.1 Anti-foundationalism, Pragmatism, Ethnocentrism 9
1.2 The Plausibility of the Anti-foundationalist Picture 30
1.3 Judith Shklar: An Anti-foundationalist Liberal 37
1.4 Overlap Between Rorty and Shklar 39
1.5 Rorty's Description of a Liberal 42
1.6 Conclusion 45

Chapter Two: The Public/Private Split 47

2.0 The Public/Private Split: Relevance and Critical Potential 47
2.1 The Tool Analogy: Moving from Language to Politics 52
2.2 Privatizing Aestheticism?: The Case of the Ironist 64
2.3 Poetry in a De-divinized World 76
2.4 Conclusion 87

Chapter Three: Liberal Ironism 91

3.0 Some Comments on Criticism 91
3.1 The Good Life 93
3.2 The Breadth of the Ironic Viewpoint 103
3.3 Metaphysics Reconsidered 105

Bibliography 110

Introduction

Contingency, Irony and Solidarity [1] is a book that addresses several common presumptions in contemporary political philosophy. Since the publication of Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* [2], it has been considered at least plausible that liberalism (as understood in North America) is predicated on several metaphysical presumptions, and that a demonstration of the inadequacy of those foundations points--*prima facie*--to the inadequacy of liberal theory. This type of criticism has been common in Continental philosophy since Horkheimer and Adorno wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [3], but it was Sandel's book that made this type of argument fashionable in anglophone philosophy. The target of Sandel's critique, John Rawls, responded in an article entitled "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical"[4], arguing for a certain pragmatic attitude toward political theories. In essence, Rawls pointed out that his theoretical constructs such as the 'veil of ignorance' and the 'original position' were metaphors to aid in one's thinking about liberalism and justice. They most certainly were not claims of the metaphysical sort once put forward by Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant, Bentham or Mill. But this has not settled the debate. On the contrary, it has blossomed in the past decade, embracing many topics, but frequently the debate revolves around the question: if liberals no longer believe in the metaphysical foundations that made liberalism possible, why are they still liberals?

Richard Rorty's contribution to this debate has been impressive. Besides a collection of essays addressing this issue from many different angles, a sustained attempt in the form of *Contingency* has allowed the liberal to formulate a novel defence of contemporary liberalism and the popular beliefs now held by many liberal thinkers. In brief, *Contingency* is an attempt to argue that liberalism and modern philosophical views of language, the self and the liberal community need not cohere in other than a pragmatic fashion--that is, they need not fall under the rubric of a single metaphysical theory. As Rorty begins his book: 'The attempt to fuse the public and the private lies behind both Plato's attempt to answer the question "Why is it in one's interest to be just?" and in Christianity's claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others.' (xiii) The history of the West has in large part been built on such an assumption--that the whole of human life can be captured in a single theory. Philosophy of the past two centuries has seen (in several areas) a turn away from such a view. The historicism of Hegel, the perpectivalism of Nietzsche, the holistic philosophy of language of Wittgenstein and Davidson, the naturalized epistemology of Quine: all of these changes in the philosophical landscape have contributed to the rejection of traditional metaphysical accounts of the self and society.

---

[1] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), hereafter cited as *Contingency.* Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in this volume. All emphasis, unless otherwise noted, is Rorty's.

[2] Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982).

[3] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1972). The original German edition appeared in 1947.

[4] John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985).

In Rorty's view, such a rejection of monolithic, ahistorical theories of the self or rationality or language as such is a defining mark of our modern age. Yet we share with our Enlightenment forebearers the belief that liberal democracy is a good form of life. In exploring how this is possible, Rorty reverses the burden of proof to ask the liberal critic why liberalism--if indeed it carries the seeds of its own destruction--is still with us, despite a thorough rejection of its Enlightenment foundations (such as a belief in an ahistorical human nature, or a 'rational agent' radically detached from its beliefs, preferences and communal, historical context).

But Rorty's position invovles much more than a reversal of the burden of proof: he accepts many of the claims of what have become known as 'communitarian' critics of liberalism. Rorty agrees with the communitarian that one's moral and political vocabulary is culturally bound, and that there is no 'God's-eye view' (to borrow Hilary Putnam's phrase) from which to evaluate our political institutions. Rorty's defence of liberalism is one that recongizes it as inescapably ethnocentric in its philosophical justifications, and Rorty does not see this as a problem, in part because he has a very limited role for philosophy to play in the liberal society.

Philosophy is not in the business of providing foundations for political institutions; though, on Rorty's view, most philosophers seem to feel this is their task. His book is not an attempt to prove liberalism is the best way of life, but rather an attempt to describe liberalism free of its traditional philosophical adornments. Regarding the question of whether Rorty's theories and arguments are themselves foundations for liberalism, his metaphorical readjustment gets to the heart of the matter: "[T]o offer a redescription of our current institutions...is not to offer a defense of them against their enemies; it is more like refurnishing a house than like propping it up or placing barricades around it."[5] (45) This, in a nutshell, is anti-foundationalism, and Rorty's battle against 'foundationalist' thinking is the legacy of his 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It is not a gross oversimplification to say that *Contingency* marks the application of those views into the field of political philosophy.

The vision of liberalism put forth in Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is at times compelling, and at times distasteful. It has elements that appeal to many contemporary philosophers, such as a creative interpretation of many figures in the canons of philosophy and literature, and it poses an alternative to a vision of political thought that many philosophers find unrealistic or constraining. What is often appealing about Rorty's liberalism is its 'minimalism' and its 'utopism' (viz. the view that a society must have an ideal to work toward). However, there is something about Rorty's particular vision of the liberal utopia that is unsettling: it seems at times to be elitist in its taste for eclectic literary pursuits over other human activities and it seems rather wistful in its commitment to the view that given sufficient freedom, the good life will naturally follow. Rorty can deflect these criticisms by showing how both of these claims are based upon misinterpretations of his views, and that these are due to a lingering metaphysical attitude in his critics. However, his rebuttal does not entirely allay serious doubt.

---

[5] See also his comments in his introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* : "Dewey seems to me to have given us the right lead when he viewed pragmatism not as grounding, but as *clearing the ground for*, democratic politics." (p. 13, emphasis added)

As for the minimalism of his theory, this is somewhat more paradoxical, and less obvious. A minimalist theory of justice is an attempt to spell out the minimum requirements for preserving a flourishing community--that is, such a theory is one which takes as a premise the idea that 'less is more' holds sway in politics. Rorty's theory is based on the notion that shifting one's perspective, giving up beliefs in the search for more (and more varied) new beliefs is what makes one most capable of realising the liberal ideal of toleration and fosters a sense of solidarity among citizens. Eschewing deep commitments to theories of human nature, or of what constitutes one's self, is what makes one a good liberal, and is the only way of believing (in good faith) that one is not a zealot.

For Rorty, such a pragmatic, 'arm's length' relation to theory is the cure for the ills of a liberal metaphysics: while clinging to a belief in 'inalienable human rights due to man's inherent rationality' was useful in bringing liberal democracy about in the first place, it has become an impediment to the flourishing of a post-modern liberal culture. In the interests of liberal society, one should abandon metaphysics. The point here is this: Rorty's minimalist theory seems to make very strong claims about what a liberal citizen should be. Not only is the liberal ironist a good person to have in a community, Rorty seems (implicitly) to think that the liberal ironist is the *best* kind of person to keep a society liberal. The paradox is that proclamations of what citizens should be like is exactly what minimalist political theories are designed to avoid. Rorty gives us a theory of how liberalism can incorporate 'ironists' who doubt the metaphysical foundations of liberalism but affirm the value of a liberal community. But this theory ends up implying that the people without these deep commitments are better liberals (partly because they are less inhibited in their pragmatism) than liberals with strong opinions on what the world, or the self, or the good life, really is.

This leads me to my biggest claim:*Pragmatists need not eschew depth.* To claim this is to reconcile the pragmatic aspects of philosophers like Nietzsche and Santayana (who were aware of the dangers of being *merely* a pragmatist) with their more speculative and theoretical utterances. It is also to point to thinkers like these and show that one need not choose between pragmatism and deep, metaphysical thinking. If one accepts this claim, one can begin to evaluate the possibility Rorty does not explore: the instance where a person is both a pragmatist and a holder of 'metaphysical' beliefs.

Rorty cannot offer knock-down arguments to discredit, once and for all, the attempt to provide foundations for our ways of thinking, and he is well aware of this. On the other hand, he can paint a picture of a plausible, post-foundational alternative, one which we might very well embrace. His task is made considerably easier if there are no other viable alternatives, and it is an unfortunate lapse on his part that he presents the contemporary scene as so impoverished. The pluralism Rorty values in liberal society does seem to exist in the philosophical community as well. His claim that epistemology has become a monolithic enterprise dominating and controlling the rest of the philosophical world may seem plausible from the perspective of the epistemologist, who can't help but see the relevance of her field to other areas of enquiry, but it is less obvious to the political philosopher that he is being so dominated. Rorty has the unfortunate habit of inflicting his personal demons on the rest of us, creating an 'us versus them' atmosphere that gets in the way of thoughtful examination of his view of contemporary philosophy. The questions 'is theorizing bad?' or 'are metaphysics and pragmatism incompatible?' are difficult to raise in this arena, and they may not assist the process of examining his positive vision of liberalism; for, whether or not it is in fact our only 'live' option, it may be an useful way to look at our political community.

It is my belief that Rorty does make some philosophical blunders, but that these may be safely shunted to the private side of his public/private split. In effect, I want to argue that we can shelve most of Rorty's implausible and unpalatable suggestions under the title "private preferences of the author, not relevant or necessary for liberal life". To do this would be to carve out the parts of his picture of liberalism we find most useful, and to go on without him to paint an even more attractive picture of a liberal utopia, one that has room even for the philosophers Rorty would rather not invite. To modify his theory in this way, to adapt it to our needs rather than criticize or reject it outright, is to engage in the ultimate pragmatic activity, and this is perhaps the best way to do justice to Rorty's philosophical vision of Western liberalism.

The structure of this essay is not designed to strictly 'map onto' the tripartite structure of *Contingency.* That is, the first chapter does not deal solely with part one of Rorty's book, nor the second with part two, etc. Rather, each chapter deals with a matter I have found not only interesting, but somewhat underdeveloped, or deserving of further comment. Thus chapter one deals with the sources of Rorty's definition of liberalism, which I was surprised to find so briefly discussed in *Contingency.* An exploration of the sources of Rorty's view of liberalism has, at the very least, the potential to help one understand his terminology, and hopefully, to gain some sense of the philosophical and literary background against which Rorty is writing. Given the emphasis he places on this multi-disciplinary background, it is not peripheral to understanding Rorty.

Chapter two is a basic attempt to work out the details of Rorty's theory, focussing on the public/private distinction, which is a major part of many liberal theories (including, most notably, that of John Stuart Mill). Rorty's endorsement of a public/private split has a complex philosophical justification (though 'justification' may be the wrong word), and writing about this may help one understand the relation of Rorty's political thoughts to his thoughts on philosophy.

Chapter three is where I hope to strike out for virigin territory: the focus here is on the implications of Rorty's theory, on what problems a Rortian liberal is likely to encounter in thinking about her situation. I do not offer these thoughts as a criticism of Rorty's views, as I do not think they offer any 'knock down' arguments against the persuasiveness of Rorty's ideas. But it is worthwhile to continue the process started in *Contingency*, of thinking about what it means to be a liberal in late twentieth-century North America. I think Rorty would encourage such speculation, and it gives me a final opportunity to attempt to draw together the many diverse threads of a fascinating narrative on political and private philosophizing. This final chapter is where I can try to articulate the relation between *Contingency*, its sources, its readers and its commentators.

Chapter One: "Cruelty is the Worst Thing We Do"

"It would be inhuman and fanatical to set up the truth as the only good."
– George Santayana

1.0 Introductory Remarks

Richard Rorty's answer to the question 'what is liberalism?' takes an unusual form. Rather than talk about institutions, Rorty talks about people: he re-frames the question to read: 'what does it mean to *be* a liberal?', and his answer as to what this character called a liberal believes is quite different from what is expected from a philosopher. Rather than saying that a liberal believes in values like freedom and equality of persons that then get cashed out in terms of a theory justifying those values, he simply says in his introduction to *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, "liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do."[1]

While his description of the liberal is greatly expanded throughout his book by reference to a diverse selection of philosophical and literary sources, his justification of why a liberal should believe that cruelty should be placed first among vices is for the most part slight. This seems to be intentional. Rorty is something of a justificational sceptic,[2] for his position is that justification of such basic social values as freedom, tolerance and an aversion to cruelty is neither profitable nor possible in any non-circular fashion. Accordingly, the kind of reflection Rorty sets out to do is 'edifying' rather than systematic, and the writers he admires similarly spend more time fleshing out the notion of what it means to be a liberal, rather than searching for arguments as to why to be a liberal.

Rorty's description of the liberal is not designed to be at odds with mainstream liberal theory. He sees his work as complementary to other liberal writers like John Rawls, John Dewey, and John Stuart Mill. However, his work is a departure from liberal theory, for Rorty does call into question the utility of philosophy for political life. To this extent, *Contingency* constitutes a significant move away from traditional political philosophy, and professional philosophy in general. It is Rorty's novel description of what makes one a liberal that marks the beginning of this departure, a turn that has its roots in his earlier book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* .[3] However, his political views are in part based on the recent innovations of other writers. One such writer of note is Judith Shklar. While Rorty credits the work of Shklar for putting this view of the liberal in its most concise form, Rorty's expansion of Shklar's picture of the liberal is in itself significant. Rorty integrates Shklar's view that a liberal is someone who believes "cruelty is the worst thing we do" into a broader revisionist or 'post-philosophical' position. He links Shklar's definition to his pragmatism, as well as his 'ethnocentrism' and 'anti-foundationalism'. This is done partly to provide persuasive reasons for abandoning a more metaphysical way of looking at liberalism, and partly to show Shklar's definition to be in keeping with Rorty's more established philosophical positions.

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[1] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), xv, hereafter cited as *Contingency*. Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in this volume. All emphasis, unless otherwise noted, is Rorty's.

[2] Although, for reasons that will become clear shortly, this is a label he might well reject, insisting instead that those who accuse him of such scepticism are clinging to an untenable account of justification, one that attempts to transcend any given culture, language, or historical epoch.

It is therefore appropriate to examine in some detail Rorty's position vis-à-vis traditional philosophy in order to understand his contribution to the philosophy of politics. Rorty's unique outlook poses many interesting questions, for sympathetic and hostile critics alike. Can his position be subject to traditional charges of inconsistency, given his rejection of so much of the philosophical milieu? If he can be treated as a more or less normal subject of enquiry, the question of whether lacunae in his position are damaging or not is highly problematic. For in many ways, Rorty seems to think it a virtue for a philosophical narrative to be 'open-ended', or subject to more than one interpretation.[4] An additional problem is the relation of Rorty's argument to his vision of philosophy and liberalism, for even if his justification is seen to be wanting, his account of a liberal utopia can still be compelling.

Rorty is nevertheless engaging in what can be called 'philosophical' discourse often enough for readers to look for the same flaws one seeks in other writers. However, if flaws are found, this does not mean his vision of liberalism must collapse: it is prudent to refrain from throwing the baby out with the bathwater. One can use his efforts as a stepping-stone towards new accounts of liberalism that rejuvenate this form of political life in the face of a changing intellectual landscape. Criticisms, on this view, are not damning, but neither are they merely a pedagogical exercise. On the contrary, they are a fruitful and important part of both the political and philosophical process, where the efforts of one person serve as the inspiration for a continuation of the shared project of improving our society and ourselves.

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[3] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), hereafter PMN.

[4] This is due in part to his antipathy towards the notion of truth, and in part to his admiration for writers like Derrida, for whom the cultivation of a plurality of interpretations is an important philosophical virtue.

1.1 Anti-foundationalism, Pragmatism, Ethnocentrism

i) Anti-foundationalism

It is the rejection of philosophical foundations for liberalism that unites Rorty's earlier polemics against the philosophical tradition with *Contingency*. As much as Rorty's pragmatism has redirected the course of political philosophy, undercutting the notion that metaphysics, philosophy of language and epistemology provide useful supports for political philosophy, Rorty's vision is at its most revolutionary when one considers his total rejection of the notion of foundations of any sort in philosophy. To put it another way, Rorty does more than say that the foundations of liberalism aren't useful, he wants to argue that it makes little sense even to think of liberalism as having philosophical foundations. This position involves renouncing any special, socially-sanctioned role for the philosopher: the notion that the theories of the philosopher are what justifies being a liberal is to Rorty's mind, utterly ridiculous.[5]

The great figures of political philosophy, thinkers like John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill tended to start their political theorizing from the ground up. They attempted to justify the liberal state by appeal to a general theory of human nature. Thus Locke's defence of private property revolved around the notion that it was labour or rational corporeal action that individuated human beings, and acting in one's rational self-interest would benefit the entire community. Kant similarly founded his moral system on the claim that all humans were rational beings, and their reason should (ideally) lead people to think along the same lines in matters moral and political: rationality thus providing a touchstone or common reference point making human solidarity possible. The prevailing belief since the time of Plato was that a political theory must make the nature of the state harmonious with human nature. In our century however, the notion that all humans possess any single feature common to all people in all places and in all eras is highly suspect. Modern psychology has made it increasingly difficult to think of a faculty called 'reason' that exists separately from the rest of the psyche. Anthropologists and linguists have for the most part debunked the idea that rationality is independent from such historical artifacts as language and culture. Thus it is very hard to conceive of rationality as something universal and unchanging. To us, rationality seems very contingent upon our past, and very culturally and socially bound.

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[5] See for example, Rorty's comments at 86: "The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes." It seems to me this basic picture underwrites most of Rorty's arguments throughout *Contingency*.

There has also been a major change in philosophy in this century which reflects this loss of faith in the notion of humanity's 'essential nature'. Many philosophers have become suspicious of what may be called an "transcendental urge" which lures philosophers into trying to break out of the world of time and chance and locate (as Kant attempted to do) what the permanent, immutable structure of the world must be. Philosophers who have been most suspicious of this project tend to propose a 'domestication' of philosophy where we strive to clear away local confusions rather than construct magnificent new theoretical edifices. Three major figures who have done this are Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and it is to these three that Rorty frequently refers when he looks to situate his own anti-foundational work in a broader context. Rorty considers these three to be pioneers of a new brand of philosophy, which he sees himself as extending into political philosophy. In his introduction to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty describes what distinguishes Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein from most other figures in the history of philosophy:

> "Each tried, in his early years, to find a new way of making philosophy "foundational"--a new way of formulating an ultimate context for thought....Each of the three, in his later work, broke free

> of the Kantian conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent his time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself once succumbed. Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program.[6]

It is crucial to realize that for Rorty, engaging in metaphysics or epistemology is not a good starting point for political theorizing, but is a project working at cross-purposes to solving existing political problems. Rorty rejects the paradigmatic role of the philosopher,[7] and he rejects the idea that liberalism requires theoretical justification. The need to provide a set of foundations to protect liberalism from the sceptic seems to Rorty simply a hangover from an older philosophical vocabulary: 'the notion of a "philosophical foundation" [of liberal democracy] goes when the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism goes.' (44) Insofar as philosophers like to compare themselves to scientists (presumably because they conceive of philosophy as a discipline that discovers certain important features of the world), Rorty prefers to side with the poets rather than the scientists (8), as he sees his activity as a kind of creation of new pictures of society, rather than a description of its core or essence.

It is fair to say that this spirit of 'creative clarification' forms the background of *Contingency* (that is, such poetic/revolutionary philosophy is for Rorty the paradigm of intellectual and cultural progress, and hence something of a yardstick for him). But whereas *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was primarily a plea for abandoning the foundational method of philosophy, *Contingency* actually presents a case for the usefulness of this new style of philosophical activity. In *Contingency* the anti-foundationalism of Rorty has branched out into new territory: it has found new roots and new applications. Since the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty has expanded his view to consider how anti-foundationalism fits with our contemporary attitudes. Anti-foundationalism is tied into Rorty's view of modern culture in three distinct ways:

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[6] PMN, pp. 5-6.

[7] At least, he rejects the role of philosopher as it is typically conceived in the contemporary academy: as system-builder, as a discoverer of 'first principles' or a person who locates 'necessary and sufficient' conditions for something. However, if one looks to the pre-modern (or perhaps post-modern) picture of philosopher as a useful skeptic, a kind of social gadfly or culture critic, then the term 'philosopher' fits Rorty rather well.

From examining our culture, it seems apparent on Rorty's view that providing foundations for a set of beliefs no longer influences a great number of people. This is most evident when we look at the activity of providing foundations for liberalism: an activity that would involve demonstrating on neutral grounds why liberalism is the most moral or rational form of life. "Liberal culture," he argues, "needs an improved self-description rather than a set of foundations." (52) He continues, linking the his anti-foundationalism with the practical needs of contemporary liberal society: "The idea that [liberal culture] ought to have foundations was a result of Enlightenment scientism, which was in turn a survival of the religious need to have human projects underwritten by a nonhuman authority." (ibid.) He goes on to point out that such scientism was useful in its day, when the natural sciences were more prominent in the Western cultural imagination. He then suggests that modern interests lean more towards art and utopian politics, and these areas should accordingly figure into contemporary liberal thinking. Philosophers should abandon scientistic notions of 'proof' and 'demonstration' where morality and politics are concerned, and recognize that scientific virtues are not always in point

The problem for contemporary liberals, according to Rorty, is how to increase solidarity among citizens of a liberal polity rather than demonstrate that liberalism is praiseworthy. And his change of resource material, his turn away from philosophy as a political resource is prompted by this emphasis on increasing solidarity. This project also reveals why 'discovering the foundations of liberalism' is less important that it once seemed:

> Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as *we* would," or "There must always be suffering, so why not let *them* suffer?"
>
> This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "then" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as

> ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and especially the novel....That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress. (xvi)

Thus cultural activities such as learning about new cultures and new forms of life replace theoretical speculation as the endeavour of principal importance for the modern liberal. Solidarity is not discovered by revealing the moral foundations of liberalism in a common human nature or rational faculty, it is created by increasing one's awareness of injustice and cruelty, something pursued with the aid of redescriptive efforts such as Rorty's

Pulling back from this view of our particular liberal culture, Rorty makes a more general claim about foundations and ethnocentricity: that appeals to foundations deny or devalue our unavoidable ethnocentricity by appealing to some sort of ahistorical judging faculty, or authority beyond the reach of time and chance. On his view, foundationalism both diverts attention from more pressing matters and fosters an attitude in debates over the morality of reform that "unless something large and powerful is on one's side, one shouldn't bother trying."[8] Foundations, on this view, simply promote distraction and defeatism. (Rorty's treatment of ethnocentrism and liberalism will be discussed in more detail below.)

His final claim about foundations and culture is much more 'philosophical' in the traditional sense, and it is developed primarily in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* ,[9] though chapters one and three of *Contingency* do aid in this development. It is Rorty's view that where cultural practices are concerned, change has causes rather than reasons. The claim is roughly a synthesis of two theories put forwards by Thomas Kuhn and Donald Davidson. Kuhn's claim is that scientific change (his was an exploration of scientific rather than political change) is brought about by shifts in vocabularies; the production of 'revolutionary vocabularies' and the resultant conflict with (and victory over) the more entrenched ways of speaking is what we (retrospectively) identify as progress in science. Davidson's claim is that the important aspect of a metaphor is its effect, not its meaning or veracity. Metaphors are familiar utterances used in unfamiliar ways. The literal meaning of a metaphor may be either true or false, but so obviously so that it seems unnecessary to make the utterance to assert the literal meaning. As for a special, 'metaphorical meaning', Davidson denies the need for such a postulation, because the criteria for meaningfulness are bound within the old vocabulary (and thus insofar as a way of speaking is new, it lacks a meaning within established theory), and because the purpose behind making the utterance can be found in the effect that utterance has on the audience. The person encountering this metaphor for the first time has to revise her 'passing theory' (Davidson's term for a temporary theory of interpreting an interlocutor's noises and gestures) as to what to expect from her interlocutor. The difference between the metaphorical and the literal is a matter of different uses of language: "The literal use of noises and marks are the uses we can handle by our old theories about what people will say under various conditions. Their metaphorical use is the sort which makes us get busy developing a new theory."[10]

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[8] "Feminism and Pragmatism" in *Radical Philosophy* 59 (Autumn 1991), p. 12, fn21.

[9] *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1991), hereafter cited as ORT.

The effects of metaphors are not insignificant in comparison with the utterance of literal statements. In fact, metaphors often bring about changes in behaviour in ways literal language use cannot: new, attractive metaphors catch our attention, change our way of thinking, and become part of our literal language. We change the language we speak by literalizing metaphors (and giving them new truth-conditions) through continued use. We simply abandon older ways of speaking; we don't bother to stop and refute what no longer is of interest to us.

Rorty applies these notions of Davidson and Kuhn to the culture as a whole and concludes that finding certain, rational foundations for belief (or finding reasons for behaviour) isn't possible, because in looking back at what we do when we change our behaviour, or our attitudes, we discern causes, but not reasons for our change in behaviour. To give a reason is to give an account of moves within an established way of speaking to describe a course of action. In moving from one language game to another, this is not possible. The criteria for what it means to be reasonable is itself up for grabs in this vocabulary shift. Reasons, on this view, are better suited to remaining within a particular language game, rather than going over to a new one. Truth, on this view, is a quality ascribed to sentences within an established language game: only literal utterances can be true, metaphors have no special meaning in addition to their literal one; but they do have a special effect. It is this effect which brings about change: thus the unexpected and metaphorical, and not the literal, normal and true utterance, is what modifies (and hopefully improves) a given way of speaking, and a given way of life.[11]

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[10] This is Rorty's characterization of Davidson's views, which occurs at 17-19. The quote is from page 17. For Davidson's endorsement of Rorty's interpretation of him, see the former's "Afterthoughts" to "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in *Reading Rorty* ed. A. Malachowski, (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

Such a position seems more than 'accidentally' supportive of a liberal position, and Rorty ends the first part of his book by pointing to the convergence of his various philosophical claims with his politics:

> To see one's language, one's conscience,[12] one's morality, and one's highest hopes, as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors, is to adopt a self-identity which suits one for citizenship in...an ideally liberal state. (61)

However, to use terms like 'accidental' and its opposite 'essential', is to fall back into an older way of speaking, rather than to look at all of our practices as contingent. To suggest some deep connections between anti-foundationalism and liberalism is perhaps to work at cross-purposes to Rorty's project.[13]

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[11] This emphasis on the importance of the unfamiliar for political and personal progress is discussed in further detail in chapter two, below. As for the role of familiar, literal utterances in changing our beliefs, Rorty discusses this in "Philosophy as Science, as Poetry, and as Politics" in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 12 for Rorty's discussion (hereafter cited as EHO). His stress on the need for the metaphorical for effecting radical change remains, however.

[12] This notion of seeing one's conscience as contingent is the subject of Rorty's second chapter; it is a topic I have thus far avoided for clarity's sake.

ii) Pragmatism

It is evident that Richard Rorty's formulation of what it means to be a liberal is linked to his pragmatism; one need only regard his basic thesis: that it serves no useful purpose to reconcile the public and the private at the level of theory.[14] Furthermore, Rorty claims that this activity is detrimental to the project of living a good life, in that it distracts one from more worthwhile pursuits, and it lends credence to the notion that theoretical tensions pose real difficulties for liberal life. Yet, most of the philosophical tradition of the West is predicated on the assumption that the issues of private and public justice should be unified by theory. Rorty's introduction sets out the traditional background to political philosophizing:

> The attempt to fuse the public and the private lies behind both Plato's attempt to answer the question "Why is it in one's interest to be just?" and Christianity's claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others. Such metaphysical and theological attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community require us to acknowledge a common human nature. They ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others--that the springs of private fulfillment and of human solidarity are the same. (xiii)

In true Wittgensteinian fashion, Rorty aims to clear up a long-standing confusion. By clarifying the issue at hand, by showing the possibilities for describing it differently, Rorty hopes to show that Plato's assumption is unwarranted, and his problems can be jettisoned for more pressing matters.

a) Redescription versus refutation

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[13] This need not be so, however. Such old words could be used in new ways (provided one is sufficiently confident one will not become, in Wittgenstein's phrase, 'bewitched by language'). Pointing to such deep connections may be a symptom of a lingering metaphysical attitude, but it need not be. It may simply be pointing to a relation between things in the world one might call 'ironic'. Here philosophers who are sympathetic to Rorty may find themselves saying things remarkably similar to Rorty's opponents, but meaning very different things. (Similarly, Rorty and the 'analytic' philosophers may share a dislike of metaphysics, but for strikingly different reasons.)

[14] The roles of the public and private spheres in Rorty's liberalism will be examined in chapter two.

Central to Rortian pragmatism is the notion that it is more profitable to redescribe a traditional problem than try to refute a preexisting position. This is due in part to the manner of expression of such a position: it is often phrased in a custom-made vocabulary that suits its formulation and predisposes one towards a certain set of problems and solutions.[15] As Rorty states in his first chapter, this is related to his historicism:

> On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of the "intrinsic nature of reality." The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are "inconsistent in their own terms" or that they "deconstruct themselves." But that can *never* be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or "merely metaphorical" is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging. For such use is, after all, the paridigm [sic] of coherent, meaningful, literal, speech.

He continues, clarifying the relation between tradition and innovation:

> Such arguments are always parasitic upon, and abbreviations for, claims that a better vocabulary is available. Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things. (8-9)

If this is Rorty's view of how social practices (they need not be exclusively philosophical) change, this 'evolutionist' account is united with his pragmatism, such that redescriptive activities can be seen as both effective strategies and more or less typical cultural activities. Revolutionary philosophy on this account does not rely on occupying a position of 'cultural arbitration'; rather it is 'naturalized', benefiting from working within the culture, changing practices by experimentation. Rorty describes how such philosophising works:

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[15] Jan Zwicky makes this familiar Wittgensteinian point in her *Lyric Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992)--that a philosophical language that borrowed its central metaphor of clarity from poetry would be strikingly different than our present language, which, following Descartes, derives its metaphors for clarity from mathematics and the pure sciences. See part one of *Lyric Philosophy, passim.*

> The latter "method" of philosophy....works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like "try thinking of it this way" -- or more specifically, "try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions."....But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and new language games. For just insofar as the new language really is new, there will be no such criteria.[16]

He then goes on to apply this notion to his forthcoming arguments:

> Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics. (9)

Thus Rorty meets the tradition at an oblique angle: he will not refute the arguments opposed to his point of view, but he will use everything at his disposal to make his position the more attractive one. This includes utilizing many of the positions developed by more traditional philosophers (even those who talk about "truth" such as Davidson); this has the effect of making his position seem justifiable to those speaking the 'older vocabularies' while describing new alternatives to those positions. His pragmatism allows him to straddle the fence between radical and conservative, taking the fruits of the theoretical tradition in order to undermine its future within the larger European tradition.[17]

b) Therapeutic pragmatism

Rorty's pragmatism is strongly linked to his therapeutic notion of philosophical activity: the pursuit of a definition of liberalism, or support for liberal values, should be tailored to our needs. That is, a philosophy of liberalism should be committed to removing obstacles to a minimally reflective endorsement of liberalism. This (and not some form of intellectual laziness) is why redescribing is for Rorty a worthwhile activity. This combining of the Wittgensteinian notion of philosophy as therapy constitutes (along with redescription) Rorty's most significant modification of classical pragmatism. This passage from chapter three of *Contingency* may help to make clear the relation between pragmatism, redescription and therapeutic philosophy:

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[16] See PMN, p. 6, where Rorty compares the 'setting aside' of the contemporary realist/anti-realist debate to the manner in which the seventeenth century Rationalists set aside the scholastic problems and debates they inherited. Redescription, on this account, is not a new philosophical activity. Cf. Rorty's introduction to ORT, entitled "Antirepresentationalism, ethnocentrism, and liberalism".

[17] Cf. PMN, p. 7, "The therapy offered [here] is, nevertheless, parasitic upon the constructive efforts of the very analytic philosophers whose frame of reference I am trying to put in question."

> Is there a way to resolve this standoff between the traditional view that it is always in point to ask "How do you know?" and the view that sometimes all we can ask is "Why do you talk that way?" Philosophy, as a discipline, makes itself ridiculous when it steps forward at such junctures and says that it will find neutral ground on which to adjudicate the issue. It is not as if the philosophers had succeeded in finding some neutral ground on which to stand. It would be better for philosophers to admit there is no *one* way to break such standoffs, no single place to which it is appropriate to step back. There are, instead, as many ways of breaking the standoff as there are topics of conversation. (51)

On this view philosophy may seem anything but useful, but this is a reference to foundational philosophy, which he is trying to subvert. Edifying or therapeutic philosophy makes its contribution by looking for new ways to end old standoffs, rather than making metaphysical evaluations of them.[18] Rorty continues by describing some new perspectives on the questions raised, and he highlights some of the developments of the first chapters of *Contingency* in so doing:

> One can come at the issue by way of different paradigms of humanity -- the contemplator as opposed to the poet, or the pious person as opposed to the person who accepts chance as worthy of determining her fate. Or one can come at it from the point of view of an ethics of kindness, and ask whether cruelty and injustice will be diminished if we all stopped worrying about "absolute validity" or whether, on the contrary, only such worries keep our characters firm enough to defend unflinchingly the weak against the strong....Because of this indefinite plurality of standpoints, this vast number of ways of coming at the issue sideways and trying to

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[18] Rorty, in fact, rarely indicates when he means 'edifying' philosophy as opposed to 'normal', analytic philosophy, which he holds in little regard. Usually the context suffices to distinguish between the two.

> outflank one's opponent, there are never, in practice, any standoffs.

Therapeutic philosophy on this account is one which make possible new ways of circumventing difficulties; the products of pragmatic redescription are tools for specialized instances of cultural wheel-spinning. The connection between such activity and the liberal society is elucidated by Rorty in concluding his paragraph:

> We would only have a real and practical standoff, as opposed to an artificial and theoretical one, if certain topics and certain language games were taboo -- if there were general agreement within a society that certain questions were *always* in point, that certain questions were prior to certain others, that there was a fixed order of discussion, and that flanking movements were not permitted. That would be just the sort of society which liberals are trying to avoid -- one in which "logic" ruled and "rhetoric" was outlawed. It is central to the idea of a liberal society that, in respect to words opposed to deeds, persuasion as opposed to force, anything goes. This openmindedness should not be fostered because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail, nor because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. It should be fostered for its own sake. *A liberal society is one which is content to call "true" whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be.* That is why a liberal society is badly served by an attempt to supply it with "philosophical foundations." For the attempt to supply such foundations presupposes a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies. (51-52)

c) Persuasion versus force

As this paragraph shows, pragmatism for Rorty is also characterized by a commitment to persuasive rather than forceful means, a quality it shares with a liberal ethos. It is the distinction of persuasion from force that marks the liberal, and the belief that persuasion rather than refutation is the desired tool of political discourse is the distinguishing characteristic of the liberal pragmatist. Rorty's pragmatism is noteworthy for such a tactic of persuasion: the tactic of 'redescribing' an opponent's position, not in order to refute it, but to make such a position look undesirable. It is Rorty's belief that passively accepting a given vocabulary, a given set of problems, tends to set things up in favour of the existing position: a new view must work within the framework created to support older ideas[19]. Thus the reformer is at a disadvantage from the start: she must work within a paradigm conducive to the position she seeks to replace.[20]

d) Particulars over universals (depictions over theories)

Part of the task of overcoming this disadvantage is recognizing which tools are the most effective for persuading interlocutors to abandon old descriptions of things for new. It is Rorty's belief that literature, with its novel and imaginative depictions of the lives and cultures of others, has a persuasive power not found in abstract philosophical theories. Thus, Rortian pragmatism is marked by a predilection for depictions of particular things over abstractions or universal claims. Rorty feels that citizens of the developed western democracies are more persuaded by appeals to tangible examples, especially those that relate to our history (shared and otherwise) than by abstract proofs or arguments. This is one cause for Rorty's advocating a move away from philosophy in favour of literature. Widespread scepticism about the notion of a general human essence leaves little hope for a theoretical justification for altruism, as the theorist cannot point to some essential feature of humans that binds us together.[21] Altruism then becomes not only difficult to justify; extreme sceptics like Nietzsche can question its desirability.

Rorty believes the best course for the liberal is to appeal to existent feelings of sympathy rather than to engage in endless argument with the sceptic. Rorty, in contrast to utilitarian or Kantian moral theorists (and hence most classical liberal theorists), looks to those things that bind us to those closest to us and seeks to build upon those sentiments, expanding them to include individuals hitherto not treated as persons we should defend. For Rorty, human solidarity "is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers." (xvi) He believes that literary works provide us with the tools to expand our sympathy for others and cultivate sensitivity to their plight. He argues that learning to regard others with a sense of solidarity is a matter of redescription, not theoretical explanation.

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[19] The question of whether the refusal to work within inherited vocabularies is at odds with liberal tolerance does not go unnoticed by Rorty. See section 1.2 below for a brief discussion.

[20] In an attempt to head off variations of the 'false consciousness' argument that may arise given his claim that we cannot transcend our current cultural situation, Rorty makes a distinction between 'cosmopolitan' and 'emancipatory' freedom in order to debunk the notion that his ethnocentric account of social reform is doomed from the start. See "Cosmopolitanism without emancipation: A response to Jean-François Lyotard" in EHO, pp. 211-222, for Rorty's discussion.

[21] This scepticism is in part fostered by liberalism, which, in an effort to be neutral on questions regarding the human good, tends to avoid reference to theories of human nature. From the liberalism of, for example, J. S. Mill and John Rawls there emerges the possibility of a viable political theory that is not founded on a theory of human nature.

One reason that literature might be more persuasive than philosophy is that reading literature is an endeavour that involves the uncoerced exercise of imagination. People reading fiction freely engage in the activity of understanding the lives of characters and the worlds those characters inhabit. Unlike the imaginative efforts made during abstract thought, sentiments such as sympathy are a major part of this process. One is also more open to persuasion reading a novel, where the enjoyment depends to some extent upon taking the writer at her word, than when following a philosophical argument, where one's critical faculties are engaged, and the reader typically resists the effects of rhetoric, especially appeals to emotion. This comparison of the motives and characteristics of reading literary and philosophical prose may support the notion that literary activities meet the needs of a liberal society. On this reading, theoretical foundations are not only unproductive because they embroil citizens in various abstract quandaries, but they are essentially lacking in persuasive power, and do nothing to expand our sympathies towards others--the fundamental force that holds liberal societies together.

But the efficacy of literature versus philosophy for promulgating liberal attitudes is contingent to some extent upon the qualities of modern society. There presumably was a time when the treatise *did* further the cause of liberalism more than the novel.[22] But on Rorty's view, modern intellectuals are, for the most part, sceptical of appeals beyond time and chance, and critical of the notion that we can transcend our language and other cultural artifacts--even our liberal institutions. Times it seems, have changed. Thinkers in the Enlightenment period were perhaps more charitably disposed toward appeals to man's innate rationality, or the notion that matters of morality could be fitted into a neutral framework that could be applied fairly without appeal to cultural artifacts. Today it is difficult to believe that rationality is unconnected to human creations such as language, or (after Freud) that the conscious, rational qualities we possess constitute the essence of being human. In addition, the notion of neutrality central to many liberal theories seems neither plausible nor productive. Thus modern liberals seem ill-disposed toward the devices that helped bring liberalism into existence.

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[22] One aspect of the modern novel that would make it suit Rorty's purposes is the explicitly self-conscious character of much modern prose. Novels such as Nabokov's and Orwell's frequently invite questions as to whether we, or our liberal society as a whole, are as sensitive to the cruelty inflicted upon others as we could be. Thus as the novel changes (in this case, presumably towards more radical and extensive moral self-examination), so does its usefulness in Rorty's liberal utopia.

It is important to realize that these claims about theory and narrative are specific to the modern age, and do not constitute claims of a universal sort. A position such as Rorty's on the value of literature and philosophy is embedded within a particular (post-Romantic) cultural context: strictly speaking, it is 'ethnocentric'. And like all interpretations of an era, it is subject to historical change. If Rorty's estimation of the *Zeitgeist* is accurate, it presumably is subject to the changing times. Understanding this shift that Rorty presumes (away from theorizing and towards descriptive, imaginative activities) requires some consideration of how these very notions of historical change and ethnocentrism have been incorporated into the modern world view.

II) Ethnocentrism

That Rorty's political philosophy is fused with the particular traditions of the culture in which he writes is evident from the subject matter of *Contingency*: a vast part of the book is concerned with figures in the Western literary tradition.[23] However, Rorty's ethnocentrism (that is, his 'embeddedness' within his culture, a position quite 'un-transcendental') is more explicit in some of his essays. It is also more subtle than it first appears. In particular, Rorty exhibits a historicist view that sets him apart from many of his colleagues in Anglo-American philosophy (though, interestingly, it is perhaps moral and political philosophy that is least hostile to historicism). Rorty's insistence on the importance of what could be called a kind of archeology in the history of ideas makes his position resemble that of Continental philosophers in many respects. But his historicism, which is of major importance to his liberal position, is used to draw him toward a form of liberalism very similar to that of major figures like Rawls, and as it is this historical sense that has been used most often to criticize Rawls, it is worth investigating how this view leads Rorty first to a notion of "inevitable and unobjectionable"[24] ethnocentricity, and finally to a very familiar kind of liberalism.

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[23] Although, as Bruce Hunter has pointed out in conversation, Rorty takes a very 'top down' view of culture: his interests are decidedly 'highbrow'. Rorty rarely incorporates the historical, journalistic and anthropological accounts he admires, and one may attribute this to disinterest, or to a certain hesitancy on his part to venture further outside his own professional arena. For more this issue of Rorty's motives, see below, page 33.

a) History & acculturation 'go all the way down'

Like anti-foundationalism and pragmatism, the idea of 'historicism' presents the opportunity to circumvent old dualisms, and present a holistic account of culture. As Rorty sees it, the notion that 'self-evident truths' form the bedrock upon which all societies are built is not only challenged by questioning the need for philosophical 'grounding' of political theories; the very possibility of such an effort seems dubious once one adopts the view that history and acculturation "go all the way down". That is, if one does not assume that there are aspects of culture (such as 'basic human dignity' or 'inalienable rights') that are somehow beyond the reach of time and chance, then one need not consider what is obviously a product of our past 'merely historical'. Without a necessary/contingent distinction, recognizing the contingency of something does not undermine necessarily the value of such an artifact. Once one gets a sense of how much history pervades our thinking, one is less likely to consider the possibility of transcending one's time and place to a 'view from nowhere', a standpoint completely free of the contingencies that shape our everyday perspective. On this view, history has the power to show how much of our vocabulary, our sense of self, or our criteria of what constitutes a just society is historically contingent.

Historicist thinkers (the most notable of whom would be Hegel) have performed a valuable service from Rorty's perspective: they have undermined the belief in human nature *an sich.* Casting doubt on notions such as truth and human nature permits an important act of redescription, and as such is not an act of scepticism towards the possibility of human solidarity[25]. In his introduction, Rorty makes the point that such consideration of the impact of a historical sense on Western intellectuals marked a new response to the sceptic who denies that there is any connection between social solidarity and private perfection:

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[24] "On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz," in ORT, p. 212.

> [M]etaphysical or theological attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community require us to acknowledge a common human nature....Skeptics like Nietzsche have urged that metaphysics and theology are transparent attempts to make altruism look more reasonable that it really is. Yet such skeptics typically have their own theories of human nature....Their point is that at the "deepest" level of the self there is *no* sense of human solidarity, that this sense is a "mere" artifact of human socialization....
>
> Ever since Hegel, however, historicist thinkers have tried to get beyond this familiar standoff. They have denied that there is such a thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self." Their strategy has been to insist that socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down -- that there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human....This historicist turn has helped free us...from theology and metaphysics -- from the temptation to look for an escape from time and chance. (xiii)[26]

The point here is that rejecting the idea of an ahistorical 'fact of the matter' regarding the nature of humans deprives the sceptic of his conclusion. Even if we allow that there is no connection between public and private goods now, we cannot infer from this that there will be no such connection in the future.[27] For historicism commits one to the view that the fact of the matter regarding humans is linked to the current state of affairs in the world, affairs that presumably will change with the passage of time. The alleged schism between the good of the individual and the good of society is a contingent one, subject to change just like everything else in our world. Historicism is as much a challenge to a Machiavellian position as it is to a Kantian one. Konstantin Kolenda puts the matter succinctly when he says:

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[25] Although with a historicist thinker like Nietzsche, such scepticism was a obstacle to a positive political theory. But in his case, the problem was misanthropy, not historicism.

[26] But, as Rorty continues, this turn alone does not solve the dilemma he seeks to resolve: "But even after this substitution takes place, the old tension between the private and the public remains."

[27] Put more forcefully, rejecting the notion of a necessary connection between public and private virtue, does not discount (nor does it devalue) the notion of a contingent connection between the two. This contingent connection between private perfection and social solidarity is the topic of chapter two.

> Rorty repeatedly reminds us that we are what our previous experiments with language have made us. As heirs of European culture, for instance, we are children, or "contingent products," of the Enlightenment in the sense that some doctrines and ideals of that historical era helped to shape our moral and political views and commitments.

Kolenda continues, addressing a common charge that such historical thinking is unnecessarily deterministic or gives a superficial account of the influence of philosophical traditions:

> But we are not..."in thrall of Enlightenment mythology" because we know of a great many alternatives to some problematic, contingently established aspects of that thinking, alternatives that are not statable in the Enlightenment vocabulary but make use of distinctions invented and introduced by so-called postmodern thinkers or derived from other contemporary cultures. Without these new distinctions, initially expressed in fresh metaphors, we would be in thrall. The active living character of language makes our beliefs historically contingent and always open to modification.[28]

For Rorty, historicism is a fact of life, part of the common vocabulary of Westerners, intellectual or otherwise. The search for 'analytic truths' or a transcendental standpoint has further been weakened by holists like Davidson and Quine, who have, in philosophy of language and epistemology (respectively) driven home the point that our beliefs and utterances are linked, cohering in vast patterns of behaviour that can be studied from within, but not scrutinized from without. Historicism is part of a larger cultural pattern of viewing ourselves as embedded, involved or *somehow* linked with our past, our world, our language and our neighbours. This having been said, it remains to be seen just how historicism can be used to further the cause of liberalism. Briefly it does so in two ways: on Rorty's interpretation, historicism more or less convincingly eliminates many of the traditional building-blocks of a liberal theory, forcing the theorist to search for ways to describe liberalism without transcendental devices that have been the source of communitarian criticism of liberalism. But perhaps of greater importance is the notion that historicism, by calling into question the distinction between the transcendental, ahistorical 'essence' and the transitory, contingent 'accident', allows the liberal to reconsider the details of the liberal landscape. In the case of ethnocentrism, this re-examination of a traditional liberal evil may be reconsidered, and analysis may reveal a liberal virtue buried underneath a concept full of ahistorical assumptions. What was once a problem case for liberals may emerge as a new weapon against critics of liberalism, from the left and the right.

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[28] Konstantin Kolenda, "Misreading Rorty", *Philosophy and Literature* 15 (1991), pp. 111-117. Cf. Richard Shusterman's article "Postmodernist Aestheticism: A New Moral Philosophy?" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 5 (1988) pp. 337-55 where he defends a thesis that ethics (construed as the most basic reflection about how to live) is 'underdetermined' by morality, which typically can be seen as "a system of obligations (and consequent rights) which can tell us what we should do in any instance." (p. 343) Such a way of thinking can be seen as a legacy of Enlightenment moral thought. By situating a contemporary dilemma (how to account for the ethical nature of personal projects or desires) within a larger historical context, one can look to other sources to posit a background realm (a source currently 'out of fashion': in this case, 'the ethical') to address hitherto unanswerable questions regarding how to live. The relevance of this particular example lies in the fact that it is in this very area--moral philosophy--that Rorty aims to use historicism to effect a transformation of our view of the entire discipline (especially its origins and dominant issues). Such a 'genealogical' approach to culture was first undertaken in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* and is currently employed in original ways by Foucault and Derrida. See especially Shusterman, pp. 342-345.

b) 'Anti-anti-ethnocentrism'

Typically ethnocentrism has been seen as a quality liberals would do well to avoid: it is considered synonymous with intolerance and a reactive, provincial style of thinking. To be ethnocentric is to be so caught up in one's own tradition that one is incapable of appreciating the beliefs and customs of another. In contrast to this, the contemporary liberal attitude may be called 'anti-ethnocentrism': a liberal is typically committed to 'rising above' his or her cultural norms in order to refrain from judging foreign or unusual cultural artifacts by the standards of the prevailing community. But if one holds a view such as Rorty's, where transcending one's time and place is not only impossible, but the desire to do so blinds one to important details of one's situation, anti-ethnocentrism is a bad corrective for a parochial attitude like ethnocentrism. Anti-ethnocentrism runs the risk of collapsing into a form of cultural relativism, leading to a quietistic attitude where a liberal can no longer justify intervening in a family, community or culture that is practicing a lifestyle harmful or cruel to some of its members.[29] Such a distanced attitude also removes from our hands an important weapon against intolerance: knowledge of our own liberal traditions.

On Rorty's view, a type of ethnocentrism which includes an awareness of our tradition of tolerance and compromise (this is perhaps a better description of our ideals that our actual historical practices), our willingness to try to take the point of view of outsiders into our own account of things, offers a way out of the traditional ethnocentric predicament. We need neither condemn outsiders for failing to conform to our practices, nor suspend all judgment for fear of damaging a foreign culture.[30] Liberal societies have undoubtedly treated neighbouring groups unjustly in the past, but the best solution for this is, in Rorty's view, to remind ourselves how such action is a betrayal of our own deeply held values. Rorty emphasizes that though liberal societies have subjugated weaker groups in the past, liberalism differs from the many types of societies that do this by exhibiting the capacity to *refrain* from resorting to force when persuasion fails. Thus, our traditions are relevant to the struggle for solidarity between different peoples, and need not be transcended in order to treat outsiders justly. Rorty calls this position 'anti-anti-ethnocentrism', but it is better perhaps to refer to it as simply 'ethnocentrism', and call the more pernicious, less cosmopolitan form of ethnocentrism 'naive ethnocentrism.'

From this ethnocentric view, it is precisely attention to the content of our culture that prevents us from embracing cultural relativism: it is manifest that our culture is not equal to all other cultures, but rather it is distinct in its commitment to principles of toleration and mutual understanding.[31] True, all cultures are the same by virtue of their being forms of life, each with its own history, vocabulary, traditions and rules and so forth; but our liberal culture is "a culture which prides itself on constantly...enlarging its sympathies....Its own sense of moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity."[32] The problem of cultural relativism only surfaces once one begins to look at cultures *qua* cultures (rather than looking at each culture as a particular entity, with unique aspects despite the common form called 'culture'). If one examines the merely the form and ignores the content, it is easy to conclude that no one culture is better than another and the moral vocabulary of one is not applicable outside its own limited domain. Hence the search for ahistorical first principles that would help us bridge this gap.

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[29] Ironically, it is Rorty's position that is most often linked to relativism, which in his view, ceases to be a possibility once you abandon belief in a transcendental standpoint from which one might locate Absolute Value. See Jürgen Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987) for a perspective critical of Rorty's alleged relativism or irrationalism. For Rorty's point, see ORT, especially "Solidarity or Objectivity?", pp. 23-24; the concluding paragraph of "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism", p. 202; as well as his introduction to that volume.

[30] This suspension of judgment, the aversion to making a commitment of moral principle when dealing with those outside our own society is what Rorty sometimes calls "wet liberalism."

But is this an unavoidable gap? From Rorty's perspective, examining the abstract and universal at the expense of the existent and particular, leads one into a difficult position, a position we need not embrace. Such a preference for form over matter, universal over particular, or essence over existence is the product of an historical preference for one side of a dichotomy over another. So, for that matter, are the dichotomies themselves contingent, historical artifacts. Things conceivably could have been different. An alternative, non-dualistic account such as Rorty's appears palatable, especially if it allows contemporary liberals to circumvent old problems. It is also appealing because of its holistic approach to the political sphere: this brand of 'post-foundational' liberalism is embedded within other social practices (linguistic, psychological, economic, etc.) rather than grounding or justifying them in an *a priori* fashion that would chafe against the modern thinker's more sceptical nature.

What is left after this process of redescribing liberalism as compatible with a certain type of ethnocentrism is the recognition that the liberal society is itself a contingent product of our history, not an expression of the 'true' nature of the human or of Justice. As he sees it, Rorty's version of ethnocentrism "urges liberals to take with full seriousness the fact that the ideals of procedural justice and human equality are parochial, recent, eccentric cultural developments".[33] He then goes on to suggest we should "recognize that this does not mean they are any the less worth fighting for." Certainly the thought that liberalism might not ultimately be the best form of political organization might put off some people,[34] but perhaps most would be reminded of the fragility of this way of life: all the more reason to take an active role in its preservation.

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[31] I do not claim any kind of mutual exclusivity here: by no means do I think that other cultures are incapable of these virtues. However, I do think (*pace* Rorty) that the fact that our society values tolerance, cosmopolitanism and engagement with strange people, customs and practices is a strong argument against a cultural relativist position.

[32] ORT, p. 204.

1.2 The plausibility of the anti-foundationalist picture

While the attractiveness of Rorty's 'post-philosophical' liberalism is fairly obvious to those tired of metaphysical criticisms of liberal theory, the plausibility of his pragmatic, ethnocentric, anti-foundationalist account is subject to some question. As Rorty sees it, philosophy is characterized by its attachment to notions like 'theory' and 'representation', and philosophers see themselves as providing foundations for the rest of culture. And it is clear that Rorty wishes to remove epistemology from its central place within philosophy. What is unclear is whether common epistemological notions are necessarily undesirable; nor is it clear that most philosophers are committed to viewing their work as a kind of arbitration between other areas of inquiry. While anything may be useful in a given context, the question is not whether epistemology might be useful to some future society,[35] but whether epistemology might have some uses in our present situation that Rorty overlooks. In an article entitled, "Deep Epistemology Without Foundations (in Language)" Alan Malachowski explores this issue: "The first notable cause for concern is [Rorty's] apparent assumption that what tells against the notion of 'foundations', tells against the notion of 'theory' in general."[36] Malachowski's critique of Rorty centers on Rorty's rather superficial description of contemporary philosophy (i.e. all modern philosophers consider epistemology to be 'first philosophy' and pursue it in a more-or-less Cartesian fashion) and his haste in jettisoning epistemology (and, arguably, philosophy) in favour of literary endeavours.[37] Malachowski gives a compelling account of how epistemology might (*contra* Rorty) conceal great variety beneath its rather unidimensional facade:

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[33] ORT, p. 208.

[34] Rorty's response to critics of his defence of liberalism usually turns on his insistence for alternatives to our present vision of an ideally liberal state. A comment like the following is indicative: 'When Frank Lentricchia,one of my critics on the left, says that "our society is mainly unreasonable," I can only ask "unreasonable by comparison to what other society?"' (EHO, p. 15n). Cf. "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation" in part three of the same volume.

[35] Rorty makes a similar point when he warns against underestimating the usefulness of 'merely "deconstructive" writing' in EHO, p. 6.

> The existence of 'variety' [in epistemology] becomes apparent as soon as we take the trouble to separate out some of the strands of metaphysics, scepticism, psychology, pragmatism and social anthropology (not to mention natural science, history, politics and religion) which have been woven together in traditional approaches to knowledge. Thinkers ranging from Foucault to the sociologists of knowledge, have begun this task already; though, unfortunately, their work is all too often taken to support Rorty's view that epistemology is simply a dead-end, when a much better conclusion here is simply that epistemology now has the chance to enter a new phase.[38]

Malachowski admits that the Cartesian brand of epistemology might not be fruitful in our contemporary situation, but he goes on to point out "this does not mean that the route is blocked for moves towards limited, naturalistic, accounts of knowledge".[39]

In suggesting a move away from the search for Truth and towards increasing freedom, Rorty seems to have a rather narrow idea of truth in mind, namely the kind of empirical truth science is traditionally thought to pursue. However, Rorty is well-known for his opposition to the notion that scientific activity should be a model for other forms of human enterprise. He frequently complains that the scientist has in our modern era been made into a kind of priest, a person people look to for answers to ultimate questions, upon whom they model their behaviour. Rorty frequently emphasizes the creative aspects of other areas of culture, simultaneously downplaying the role of science and the more discovery-like aspects of poetry or other 'soft' disciplines. This is strange given Rorty's eagerness to abandon the distinction between the 'hard' sciences and 'soft' humanities. Rorty does not seem to want to let other areas compete with science for use of the term 'true' in part because that term to him seems of little use, but also because he seems to feel a notion like moral truth will inevitably be subjected to a reductive association with something like 'conditions of empirical adequacy'. However, it is not clear why we should not naturalize talk about truth and simply 'go holistic' as Rorty urges so often elsewhere. Truth can turn out to have as many meanings as our current language-games would allow, thus we could plausibly speak of moral truth, religious truth and poetic truth without relinquishing or altering our use of the notion of scientific truth.[40] This would avoid the reduction of diverse activities like poetry and science to either side of a 'creation/discovery' dichotomy. Rorty makes a significant effort to describe science in poetic or creative terms, but the question begged by this move is: why must we *choose* between creation or discovery?[41] Rorty's preference for one side of a particular dichotomy may be blamed on a lapse in his holistic critique (which causes him to posit yet another undesirable dichotomy), or it may be part of an attempt to re-orient western culture, which he sees as unnecessarily emphasizing one of its two favourite metaphors.[42]

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[36] Alan Malachowski, "Deep Epistemology Without Foundations (in Language)" in *Reading Rorty*, p. 144. For Rorty's warnings against the dangers of the urge to theorize, see *Contingency*, Part II, *passim*.

[37] Consider Malachowski's comments in "Deep Epistemology", p. 150: "Literature has dealt well with the connections between knowledge and virtue. On other epistemological issues it has tended to mimic traditional philosophers, muddy the waters or simply pass over in silence. Rorty is prepared to abandon epistemology because of a dearth of results: by parity of reasoning, he should not expect us to turn to literature for direct compensation." Given the turn towards virtue ethics in Rorty's work (discussed below), his preference for literature seems less of a mystery.

[38] Ibid., p. 147.

[39] Ibid.

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[40] Rorty does occasionally reveal such a holistic attitude towards the use of the term 'true', but frequently his references to truth center around its lack of utility or interest for philosophy. Especially interesting are his comments in *Contingency,* p. 54n, where he endorses a holistic account of truth while attacking the notions of cognitivity and justification. Here his divergence from his more typical dislike of talking about truth is bound up with an assault on related epistemological issues.

[41] To my mind, an emphasis on creation at the expense of discovery is undesirable for philosophers in general and pragmatists in particular. We risk losing the notion of philosophical enquiry having a substantively distinct quality, separating the discipline from literature on more than stylistic grounds. Philosophy should, I believe, claim to do something distinct from fiction, although both literary genres may achieve similar results. At the very least, authorial intention should carry *some* weight when evaluating a text, and thus philosophers' belief that they are doing something different than literary creation should not be discounted. Regarding pragmatism, I think excess stress on autonomy and creative ability may lead one to overestimate the powers of the agent attempting to interpret the world in the most effective manner possible. Such underemphasis of the commonsensically realist qualities of pragmatism often leads to the assumption that pragmatism is in fact a form of idealism. For more on this idealist reading of Rorty's pragmatism, see J. Heal, "Pragmatism and Choosing to Believe" in *Reading Rorty*, pp. 101-114.

One other question for the anti-foundationalist liberal regards the relation of the activity of redescription to the principle of liberal tolerance. Why shouldn't a liberal engage with the critics of liberalism on their own terms, rather than outflanking them by 'changing the subject'? Here both Rorty's ethnocentrism and his justificational skepticism come to the fore. As he argues in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy":

> We have to insist that not every argument need [sic] to be met in the terms in which it is presented. Accommodation and tolerance must stop short of a willingness to work within any vocabulary that one's interlocutor wishes to use, to take seriously any topic that he puts forward for discussion. To take this view is of a piece with dropping the idea that a single moral vocabulary and a single set of moral beliefs are appropriate for every human community everywhere, and to grant that historical developments may lead us to simply *drop* questions and the vocabulary in which those questions are posed.[43]

This passage nicely sums up how Rorty entwines the ideas of dropping a theory of human nature, refusing to see language as ahistorical, universal or neutral, and recognizing that toleration 'stops short' of transcendent anti-ethnocentrism. Statements like this highlight the impotence of traditional philosophical theories, for such theories either embroil us in metaphysical pseudo-problems like the above question regarding tolerance and redescription, or they simply fail to provide insight as to where to draw the line that non-theoretical (perhaps commonsensical) reflection decides everyday, without the help of philosophy.[44] Rorty's attitude regarding the powerlessness of traditional philosophy may hopelessly complicate another question, one that deserves mention. The issue is whether Rorty's lack of detail on difficult political issues is a desired lacuna on his part, and if it is, whether such an omission is acceptable to his readers. Rorty may back away from giving concrete answers to pressing political questions in part to defer to more experienced authors, and in part to mark a break in the tradition of philosophers dictating mores to the rest of the culture. In this sense, giving more specific answers to questions about where to draw the line regarding tolerance may simply encourage philosophers to keep 'talking down' to our fellow citizens: concrete political advocacy on Rorty's part may fuel the prevailing philosophical inclination.

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[42] Arguably, the stress on discovery comes from Cartesian or Enlightenment philosophy, and that on creation from Romanticism. Rorty makes an effort to link these two forces in his introduction to *Contingency*. If he is correct in assuming that these two themes still hold some power over modern thinking, his strategy of emphasizing one over the other for the sake of balance may clear him of the charge of inconsistency.

[43] "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" in ORT, p. 190.

However, it seems that a lack of involvement is as much a part of the prevailing animus as is hubris. Rorty acknowledges as much in his writings on the American academic scene.[45] This puts Rorty's position in some tension: his reticence can be interpreted as a new brand of philosophical humility, or just the latest in a long line of 'armchair philosophy': in the latter case, the utility of his writing can be called into question (if he is calling for restraint in an already disengaged academy), or he can at least be accused of self-deception, for his work may ultimately make no more difference than that of any forgotten metaphysician.

But it seems most sensible to look to the overall spirit (if that is not too arcane a term) of his writings in order to determine his aims. His work is best conceived as an exercise in metaphilosophy: it is an attempt to expose and cleanse us of what Nietzsche called "the prejudices of the philosophers". Rorty's aim is to naturalize philosophy in the broadest sense: to put the history of ideas in their proper place in society and to debunk the notion that politics needs theoretical support anymore than society did before it gave rise to theorists. The theories we construct to understand our world are useful tools to that end, but they do not, in and of themselves, determine our fate.

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[44] Though on a Rortian view, such pseudo-problems are far from harmless. The anti-ethnocentrism discussed above not only produces philosophical red herrings like 'can liberalism be proven, on neutral grounds, to be superior to fascism?', but it produces real problems of cultural relativism such as 'can a liberal intervene in another culture that regularly harms some of its members?' For a discussion of questions of the latter kind, see Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism,Community and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).

[45] See his comments in ORT, p. 16; Cf. "Habermas and Lyotard on postmodernity" in EHO.

This having been said, it remains to be seen how badly the field of political philosophy needs this corrective. It is questionable whether Rorty's polemic against foundationalism isolates a long-standing problem in political philosophy. Ontological criticisms of liberalism by writers like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor[46] marked a shift in the debate over liberalism in the 1980s, but the response of John Rawls--among others--may have been the last word. Communitarians like Sandel and Taylor critique liberal foundations by questioning the ahistorical, neutral model of rationality employed by liberals like Locke, Kant and Bentham. Rorty's anti-foundationalism takes the wind out of the communitarians' sails by denying that liberalism needs such a conception of rationality, and by denying that liberals need employ foundations in the sense suggested by such critics. However, it is not clear that modern liberals are foundationalists or rely on a notion of reason that is free from the contingencies of time and chance.

In a 1985 article entitled "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical", John Rawls argued that the notion of rationality put forth in his major work *A Theory of Justice* (considered by many liberals and critics to be the central text of contemporary liberalism) was culturally and historically bound in just the manner that communitarians said reason must be. As Rawls points out in his introduction to "Justice as Fairness", "Justice...is a political conception in part because it starts from within a certain political tradition."[47] Indeed, Rawls adds that part of the motive behind writing *A Theory of Justice* was to avoid the commitment to a theory of human nature found in utilitarianism.[48] Rawls' position seems to anticipate Rorty's, especially when Rawls claims:

> To secure...agreement we try...to avoid disputed philosophical, as well as disputed moral and religious, questions. Thus, justice as fairness deliberately stays on the surface,

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[46] See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) and Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate" in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. N. Rosenblum (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[47] "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs 14* (1985), p. 225.

[48] Ibid.

> philosophically speaking. Given the profound differences in belief and conceptions of the good at least since the Reformation, we must recognize that, just as on questions of religious and moral doctrine, public agreement on the basic questions of philosophy cannot be obtained without the state's infringement on basic liberties. Philosophy as the search for truth about an independent metaphysical and moral order cannot, I believe, provide a workable and shared basis for a political conception of justice in a democratic society.[49]

This view closely resembles Rorty's, especially in its appeal to historicism and a relegation of reflection on the good to the private rather than the public sphere. Rorty points to Rawls as a philosopher who embraces the nonfoundational liberalism he advocates, while emphasizing the roots of this liberal tradition in the writings of Michael Oakeshott and John Dewey. Rorty argues that these three 'have all helped undermine the idea of a transhistorical "absolutely valid" set of concepts which would serve as "philosophical foundations" of liberalism, but each has thought of this undermining as a way of strengthening liberal institutions.' (57) The question is whether Rorty's work *differs* significantly from Rawls. If Rawls has already defeated critics who accuse liberalism of having questionable foundations, then Rorty is fruitlessly engaging in a battle that has already been won by liberal theorists. However, *Contingency* can be seen as an attempt to put the work of writers like Rawls into a larger philosophical and historical context. Rorty may also show motives for embracing a position like Rawls' that have not been fully articulated.

But perhaps the best way to understand the relation of *Contingency* to *A Theory of Justice* and other more orthodox discussions of liberalism is to emphasize the fact that Rorty is engaging not only in political philosophy, but metaphilosophy. Rorty's work is designed to call into question the formal, theoretical style of philosophy practiced by both foundationalist and non-foundationalist philosophers, by epistemologists as well as those political philosophers influenced by contemporary epistemology. Rorty is trying to broaden the horizons of philosophizing about politics, with the aim of including in our cultural conversation writers traditionally considered to be doing something other than 'rigorous' (or 'real') philosophy. Writers who do not construct systems or theories of liberalism are potentially 'edifying' philosophers on Rorty's account, and his forays into epistemology and philosophy of language are designed to make philosophers more willing to consider the value of philosophers who (unlike Rawls) have some insight into liberalism that does not specifically concern its theoretical structure. Rorty is making room for a different kind of writer engaging in a project with a different, but compatible, goal.

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[49] Ibid., p. 230.

1.3 Shklar's picture - an anti-foundationalist liberal

A good example of an edifying, anti-foundationalist liberal (whom Rorty very much admires) is Judith Shklar. Her 1984 publication *Ordinary Vices* is a straightforward examination of the common (and hence frequently overlooked) vices in liberal society.[50] Shklar simply describes the vices she finds and engages in philosophical reflection upon them. This is not to suggest that her work is merely descriptive, that she avoids making normative or evaluative comments. On the contrary, Shklar's work is full of compelling insights into the moral nature of the contemporary liberal character. Her work does not show the same structure as a theoretical work like Rawls': but *Ordinary Vices* displays its own brand of rigour. Shklar's focus on particular examples from literature and her refusal to engage in argumentation of a more traditional style of moral philosophy makes her a good candidate for Rorty's commendation. Furthermore, she is unabashedly ethnocentric and unconsciously non-foundational in her thinking. It is not surprising that it is from Shklar that Rorty borrows the catchy phrase that describes the moral self-image of the anti-foundationalist liberal: 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'.

In contrast both to Rorty and the philosophers he criticizes, Shklar is fairly unconcerned with deep metaphysical needs: her focus is rather on deep moral needs and persistent ethical dilemmas. *Ordinary Vices* is mainly devoted to exploring aspects of the liberal character as revealed in literature. However, in her introduction, Shklar does make it explicit that such a project is a rejection of much of the Western intellectual tradition. To discuss 'ordinary vices' is to undertake something most philosophers have ignored; those thinkers preferring most often to examine less mundane afflictions of the human character.[51] In addition, to 'put cruelty first' is, as Shklar point out, to put secular affairs ahead of theological or metaphysical concerns. As Shklar remarks in her first chapter (aptly entitled "Putting Cruelty First"):

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[50] Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard/Belknap, 1984).

> To put cruelty first is to disregard the idea of sin as it is understood by revealed religion. Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God; pride--the rejection of God--must always be the worst one, which gives rise to all the others. However, cruelty--the willful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear--is a wrong done entirely to *another creature.* When it is marked as the supreme evil it is judged so in and of itself, and not because it signifies a denial of God or any other higher norm.[52]

The parallel to contemporary theories of justice is implicit in this claim that putting cruelty first is a rejection of a divine or otherwise higher norm. Putting cruelty first means attending to the particulars done in one person's harming another, rather than seeking a theory to explain the injustice of such an act. It is to turn one's attention away from (and in this sense to reject) a divine structure to focus on 'the here and now': the everyday injustices--acts that are wrong 'in and of themselves'--done by humans to one another.

A large part of Shklar's project involves examining the perils faced by the philosopher who turns her eye to the everyday brutalities of the world, rather than to the abstractions of justice; again, a departure from the philosophical norm:

> Putting cruelty *first* is, however, a matter very different from mere humaneness. To hate cruelty more than any other evil involves a radical rejection of both religious and political conventions. It dooms one to a life of skepticism, indecision, disgust, and often misanthropy. Putting cruelty first has therefore been tried only rarely, and it is not often discussed. It is too deep a threat to reason for most philosophers to contemplate at all.[53]

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[51] *Ordinary Vices*, p. 1; chapter one, p. 7 *et passim.*

[52] Ibid., pp. 8-9, emphasis Shklar's.

[53] *Ordinary Vices*, p. 8, emphasis Shklar's. This notion of cruelty being 'too deep a threat to reason' is perhaps one motive for a turn away from theory and in favour the more detached disposition of irony.

Such a thinker runs the risk of cynicism, misanthropy and possibly hypocrisy or apathy, and given these ills it is perhaps understandable why the philosopher often turns a blind eye to cruelty in order to theorize on less brutally manifest (and pervasive) vices. A chapter of *Ordinary Vices*, as well as the later parts of *Contingency* are concerned with this very problem of misanthropy and the difficulties in remaining sensitive to the cruelties suffered by others, whether inflicted by our negligence or selfishness, or by our social institutions.

With the modifications of Shklar's liberalism laid bare, one can see not only the connections between *Contingency* and Rorty's earlier work, but between the efforts of Shklar and Rorty. Both writers effected a break from traditional theory, hardly an easy task given the predilection within contemporary political philosophy to focus research around a few major theoretical works. While Rorty's departure is quite methodical and explicit, Shklar sets off on her path with hardly an acknowledgement of the tradition around her. She chooses instead to immerse herself in an older (for the most part pre-Enlightenment) tradition, and her thesis stands out in its rejection of the 'metaphysical' approach to thinking about liberalism. Rorty's rejection is predicated on many developments within just such a tradition.

1.4 Overlap between Rorty and Shklar

While Shklar is primarily concerned to show that the notion of making cruelty the worst vice is a useful conception of liberalism (an important revision for philosophers, but an idea that Shklar claims is implicit in much of our literature), Rorty is concerned with the additional task of incorporating the view that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do' into a more developed philosophical position. Thus his project takes on a significantly different form: the exploration of cruelty as exposed in literature takes a back seat to discussions of how one might view language, the self, and the liberal community as historical contingencies, rather than products of a divine order or man's innate rationality. Shklar for the most part turns a blind eye to the tradition of Kant, Mill and Rawls in order to highlight the literary traditions--and pre-Enlightenment philosophical traditions--that most political philosophers tend to ignore. Rorty, on the other hand, directly confronts the contemporary philosophical community. He attempts to show how recent philosophical developments (such as those of Wittgenstein, Dewey, Davidson, Quine, and Sellars) make a view like Shklar's plausible. His is an effort to make Shklar's conception of liberalism seem less like an anachronism. In so doing, Rorty reveals the intimate relationship of his views of various subjects: philosophy of language, psychology, politics, literary theory, pragmatism and postmodernism all intertwine to form a concerted, polemical narrative of the traditional philosophy that stands in contrast to that of writers like Shklar. The philosophical defence of Shklarian liberalism in part makes obvious why the author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* would concern himself about the relationship between private, ironic self-creation and liberal politics.

Both *Ordinary Vices* and *Contingency* mark a return to virtue ethics; the focus is on the development of characters, not theories. Bearing this in mind, the tendency of both books to concentrate on literature rather than philosophy appears as something other than an arbitrary or unreflective, rebellious gesture. Both Shklar and Rorty are convinced that the particular situations depicted by literature are more compelling (and hence more useful) than the generalizations made by philosophy. This conviction that literature has more to teach us than philosophy stems from a deep dissatisfaction with Enlightenment rationalism, specifically with the notion that philosophy, in its turn away from the details of particular situations, is somehow getting closer to the truth of the matter. This is of concern to Rorty for his aforementioned hostility to a metaphysics that posits an atemporal version of truth as the goal of inquiry.[54] For Shklar, the problem similarly centers around a preoccupation with a realist account of truth for the sake of 'grounding' liberal theory;[55] but she is more concerned about its pernicious political implications. In her view, metaphysics provides a justification for otherwise immoral actions. She paraphrases Montaigne's attitude to religion, allowing his view to describe her own: "[Christianity] preached a purer doctrine than any other religion but has less influence on human conduct."[56]

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[54] Rorty does say that these metaphysical notions have done a lot of good in the past. But this having been said, he paints a rather convincing picture of metaphysics being at cross-purposes with the flourishing of twentieth century liberalism.

[55] Indeed, any transcendent claims that would supersede the priority of cruelty among vices poses a problem for Shklar. See for example her comments on hypocrisy in *Ordinary Vices*, p. 67ff.

This idea that 'showing' the perils of certain attitudes, rather than 'saying' them in a general form owes a debt to Wittgenstein's therapeutic paradigm of philosophy, and the domestication[57] of moral philosophy by both Rorty and Shklar shows a remarkable convergence of several philosophical trends: the elucidation or clearing away of philosophical 'pseudo-problems' first developed in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [58] is combined with the more anti-theoretical philosophical style of the later Wittgenstein and the notion of philosophy as therapy developed in *Philosophical Investigations*. (The crucial shift here is one from a therapeutical notion of removing impediments in order to 'see the world aright' in the *Tractatus* to a notion of 'scratching where it itches', or removing impediments to practical or non-stagnant contemplation of philosophical issues which characterizes much of the *Investigations*.) Here the notion of philosophy as therapy merges with classical pragmatism: the notion that what we call true is what best serves human interests (historically and ethnocentrically conceived).

Both Shklar and Rorty turn towards virtue ethics because of a perception of the bankruptcy (and potential danger) of Enlightenment, theory-based ethics. The ethics of our modern era are part of the larger practice of philosophy; following Wittgenstein, such an activity is doomed to failure in a sense, for it detaches philosophy from the rest of culture, from human ends. Such a study suffers the same fate as philosophy of language, which Wittgenstein saw as the victim of perpetual wheel-spinning: "The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work."[59] By extending Wittgenstein's observation beyond philosophy of language, one arrives at a very Rortian conclusion: abstract moral philosophy is rendered useless (though far from inactive) by such continuous disengagement from the rest of culture.

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[56] *Ordinary Vices*, p. 11.

[57] Generally a Wittgensteinian term, I owe knowledge of this to Jan Zwicky, as I borrow her thesis that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* are in fact of a similar spirit, separated most notably by a move towards domesticity in the latter work, rather than an outright rejection of the former in the latter. See her *Lyric Philosophy*, *passim*, for her view.

[58] This notion was developed almost simultaneously in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, though there is no evidence Heidegger was familiar with Wittgenstein's work.

[59] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), pt. I, §133.

Shklar and Rorty agree that it is literature that puts philosophers (among others) back in touch with culture. With this perception of the emptiness of the theoretical tradition (for liberals and critics alike), both Shklar and Rorty look not to system builders such as Descartes or Kant, or even Rawls, but to 'edifying' philosophers (perhaps best exemplified by Dewey and Montaigne, the 'heroes' of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Ordinary Vices*). They share many common opinions on the role of philosophy and the philosophical value of literature. On the whole Shklar is more explicit in the retrieval of virtue ethics, and the rejection of the tradition. Rorty's partial use of the fruits of that tradition do not mark as clear a break with Enlightenment thinking about morality. However, Rorty's fusion of Shklar's emphasis on cruelty with his own anti-foundationalist position greatly clarifies the struggle between traditional liberalism and Rorty's liberal ironist.

1.5 Rorty's description of a liberal.

Though Rorty rarely explicitly mentions Shklar in *Contingency*, his association of liberalism with an aversion to cruelty stems from her, and his debt to her is large. In his introduction, Rorty makes clear the thinking behind *Contingency*, and Shklar's role in setting up the backdrop for Rorty's more detailed discussions that follow is evident:

> [*Contingency*] sketches a figure whom I call the "liberal ironist." I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do.

Rorty continues, making explicit his addition to Shklar's definition:

> I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires -- someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease. (xv)

The ironist part of Rortian liberalism finds its source not in Shklar, but in more mainstream sources in philosophy. From Isaiah Berlin, Rorty gives shape to this notion of the liberal ironist, and this points to a major difference between Shklar and Rorty: the use of traditional philosophy to--if not justify, then perhaps 'illuminate'--a view of liberalism as a basic attitude of tolerance, cosmopolitanism and a commitment to using persuasion rather than force to deal with others.

In citing Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of liberty", Rorty nicely captures the attitude of liberal ironism:

> Berlin ended his essay by quoting Joseph Schumpeter, who said, "To realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian." Berlin comments, "To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity."[60]

Rorty relates these thoughts to the project undertaken in *Contingency*:

> In the jargon I have been developing, Schumpeter's claim that this is the mark of the civilized person translates into the claim that the liberal societies of our century have produced more and more people who are able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes -- the contingency of their own consciences -- and yet have remained faithful to those consciences. Figures like Nietzsche, William James, Freud, Proust, and Wittgenstein illustrate what I have called "freedom as the recognition of contingency."...I shall claim that such recognition is the chief virtue of the members of a liberal society, and that the culture of such a society should aim at curing us of our "deep metaphysical need." (46)

This passage illustrates many of the features of Rortian liberalism: the anti-metaphysical attitude; the importance of recognizing contingency; the emphasis on individual virtues and character development rather than on duties and obligations. The mixture of irony and unflinching courage is the hallmark of Rorty's new liberal: concerned with maintaining the virtues of recognizing the relative validity of her beliefs and of standing for those beliefs. This liberal turns her back on the project of finding reasons to be a liberal, and nonetheless remains committed and involved in her political community. Despite the sense of detachment that often surrounds an attitude of irony, the liberal ironist is (ideally) not cynical: she adopts an engaged stance towards the well-being of her fellow citizens. The picture of the liberal ironist as a bearer of Schumpeter's credo is crucial in undermining the charge that an ironist cannot be a liberal by virtue of her disdain for grounding her beliefs in anything more grandiose than her own psyche. By appealing to Schumpeter, Rorty debunks the notion that the foundationalist, or metaphysician can by the only true liberal. As he points out in a footnote to a recent article, the assumption that his ironic pragmatism and conviction are incompatible (and thus his liberalism is merely a form of relativism) is itself questionable:

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[60] Though Rorty takes both the notion of 'realising the relative validity of one's beliefs' and the political dangers of an 'incurable metaphysical need' from this essay, the position of Berlin should in no way be confused with Rorty's ironism. Both Berlin and Schumpeter serve Rorty's rhetorical aims--by providing pithy quotes--more than buttressing his arguments. That role is played most often by Davidson, Freud and Wittgenstein.

> We pragmatists are often told that we reduce moral disagreements to a mere struggle for power by denying the existence of reason, or human nature, conceived as something which provides a neutral court of appeal. We often rejoin that the need for such a court, the need for something ahistorical which will ratify one's claims, is itself a symptom of power-worship -- of the conviction that unless something large and powerful is on one's side, one shouldn't bother trying.[61]

Thus in his initial sketch of the liberal ironist, Rorty has undermined many of the assumptions that make criticisms against him possible. He has redescribed the landscape sufficiently to at least make the liberal ironist a viable candidate for consideration. And he has clarified this notion of liberal ironism to highlight the emphasis on preventing cruelty and maintaining faith in one's convictions despite the lack of ahistorical foundations for those convictions. But if the virtue of Rorty's account lies in its novelty, then the question arises: has this been said before? What is the relation of Rorty's work to Shklar's, upon which so much of Rorty's liberalism is based?

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[61] "Feminism and Pragmatism" in *Radical Philosophy 59* (Autumn 1991), pp. 3-14. The passage quoted is found on page 12 (footnote 21). Cf. Rorty's comments on Nagel in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 8: 'The human need which is gratified by the attempt…to stand outside all human needs--the need for what Nagel calls "transcendence"--is one which [we] antirepresentationalists think it culturally undesirable to exacerbate.'

1.6 Conclusion

If comparing books is an activity that is, as it were, in the spirit of Rortian liberalism, what can one conclude from comparing *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and *Ordinary Vices*? One glaring difference is the resources each writer draws upon: Shklar looks to pre-Enlightenment writers, such as Montaigne, and novelists such as Conrad, Austin and Hawthorne, while Rorty looks to more modern sources such as Quine, Davidson and Freud (and also to Proust, Orwell and Nabokov). And while Shklar for the most part ignores the philosophical tradition, recasting political philosophy simply by discussing matters she thinks are often overlooked, Rorty tends to argue against the tradition, frequently with very traditional tools. Rorty's relation to mainstream philosophy is much more at issue: he is constantly conscious of his relation to the historical canon he is trying to redescribe. It is this aspect of his writing that illuminates Rorty's more ambitious project of persuading philosophers to do more and more work like Shklar's, and less work that smacks of abstract theory. Presumably, Rorty's goal could someday be achieved, and his *raison d'être* would disappear. Shklar's work provides more of a model for what a 'post-philosophical' (that is, post-theoretical) work of philosophy might look like.

Having clarified both the common and the differing themes in Rorty's and Shklar's work, it is worthwhile to evaluate Rorty's efforts in light of Shklar's. If Rorty is basing his work at least in part on Shklar, it is fair to ask whether his work extends or merely recapitulates the ideas found in *Ordinary Vices.* When one enquires as to which of these two texts is the most original act of redescription, both books seem likely candidates: *Ordinary Vices* presents a striking new version of liberal philosophy, while *Contingency* redescribes huge portions of the history of ideas of Western culture. While Rorty's work may remain tied to the current state of affairs, it is with good reason: Rorty seeks to effect change across the board. Rorty's vision of liberalism is one that significantly downplays the role of philosophical thought. Liberalism works well with a minimum of theoretical reflection: reciprocal tolerance can be achieved, not without work, but certainly without much of contemporary philosophical work. While Shklar shares Rorty's anti-theoretical animus, she paints a picture of liberalism that is much more troubling, much more complex. Liberalism is, for Shklar, a very difficult position to embrace, one filled with pitfalls and constant tensions, tensions that can neither be overcome theoretically nor, in some cases, in practice. Shklar's liberal needs a good deal of ethical reflection to learn to cope with a position that commits one to relinquishing black and white for a lifetime of shades of grey. As she sums up her book, "[t]his has been a tour of perplexities, not a guide for the perplexed."[62]

Rorty's book is more of a guide, specifically, a guide for philosophers, a potential starting point for the expression of new ideas. His vision of liberalism is rife with notions of relative simplicity, domesticity, and hope. To claim this is not to trivialize these qualities: both Rorty's optimism and Shklar's less rosy view are important qualities for liberal life.

If one further enquires as to which is the most useful (a fitting criterion for pragmatic philosophy), again, both books present a strong case: *Contingency* seems to speak to a need in the current philosophical community, more so than Shklar's book, which is more difficult for the contemporary philosopher to incorporate into her own canon of important texts. But to play the virtues of these two books off of one another misconstrues the role of edifying philosophical writing. The point of both of them is to change our thinking about liberalism. The differences between them are significant, but the two revisionist books do not cancel out one another. They seem like different tools for similar, but not identical purposes, and it is with this analogy in mind that one may proceed to scrutinize Rorty's idea of liberalism in greater detail.

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[62] *Ordinary Vices*, p. 226.

Chapter Two: The Public/Private Split

"An anti-metaphysical view of the world--yes, but an artistic one."
-- Friedrich Nietzsche

2.0 The Public/Private Split: Relevance and Critical Potential

Rorty's work is most traditional when he addresses the division between the public and the private in liberal society. Here Rorty is, for practical purposes, in line with the majority of the liberal tradition. However, the coherence of the public and private is somewhat different in Rorty's work, and is deserving of scrutiny. Rather than separating these two realms by reference to a theory, Rorty places them in an non-theoretical (and he claims, basically unproblematic) relation to one another.[1] He rejects the attempt to reconcile the public and the private at a theoretical level as pointless, and possibly dangerous for contemporary life. He posits instead the notion of the 'liberal ironist': an anti-foundationalist liberal who, through her rejection of metaphysics, avoids many traditional pitfalls of liberalism while upholding liberal beliefs. In *Contingency*, Rorty addresses the question of whether such a person could indeed help the liberal cause, but perhaps a more interesting question is what new pitfalls arise out of this new position. Even if Rorty thinks an ironic attitude is better than a metaphysical one for today's intellectual (and such a position is, Rorty argues, primarily for the 'intellectual elite'), it is worth considering what new problems one might encounter. From this point one can work to improve Rorty's vision of the liberal ironist. Such a project is in keeping with Rorty's utopianism: the belief that *some* notion of the ideal social environment, and not just endless critique, is necessary to achieve social change.[2] The more attractive our vision of utopia, the more reason to work towards its realization. To work to improve our vision of a personal ideal is analogous to our working to improve our society and our societal ideal. Indeed, given Rorty's attention to what it means to be a liberal, questions about how to be a better liberal are not beside the point. But utopian goals, visions of the future, both public and private, must seem not only desirable but feasible. A utopia with obvious flaws is not likely to capture our imagination.

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[1] It is important that Rorty is speaking of reductive theories that purport to exhaustively explain their objects. 'Theoretical' is, for Rorty, shorthand for 'theoretical reconciliation'. Rorty's account may be a theoretical model, but not reductive in the sense that (on Rorty's view) Kantian deontological theories explain the private in terms of the public, or as Nietzsche did by similarly reducing public morality to personal self-creation.

[2] This is, for example, the source of his disagreement with Michel Foucault. See Rorty's "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The case of Foucault" in EHO; Cf. *Contingency*, pp 61-69, especially 64n.

Accordingly, the relationship between public and private in Rorty's work should be explored in terms not only of its unique justification, but in terms of its implications for the public and private roles fulfilled by individual liberals. It is vital, in other words, to examine the kind of private and public lives Rorty envisions in his liberal utopia. One may accept his position vis-à-vis theory and its relation to politics (as explored above in chapter one), without embracing Rorty's picture of how public and private activity do--or do not--affect one another. To this extent one may accept his criticism of traditional philosophy (regarding its exaggerated sense of its political efficacy), but reject his alternative vision of 'edifying philosophical conversation.'

The goals of this chapter are to elucidate Rorty's visions of public and private discourse as far as they are discernible in *Contingency*, and to question Rorty's pictures on his own terms: that is, to examine whether his liberal utopia coheres with his anti-foundationalism and his pragmatism. Central to this will be a consideration of Rorty's notion of progress: for although he does restrict the use of this notion, it is far from absent in his thinking.[3] Thus his conception of progress will similarly be weighed against his overall philosophical outlook. From a different angle, it is also worthwhile to examine how liberal Rorty's utopia would really be, given his vision of the good life, which (for good or ill) is much richer than that articulated by most liberal writers. This issue is best illuminated by a consideration of how Rorty's liberal tolerance coheres with his anti-metaphysical attitude, and more broadly, his stylistic tactic of equating liberal progress with the 'secularization' of culture. From there the specific skills possessed by the Rortian liberal will be considered, in order to examine the claim that the liberal ironist has a positive contribution to make to the flourishing of liberal culture. The chapter will progress, then, from an examination of the non-theoretical account Rorty gives of the coherence of public and private projects, to an examination of their interaction and mutual support, to conclude by considering whether the distinction between public and private is not as firm as Rorty would like us to suppose.

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[3] It is finally articulated, however, in the concluding chapter of *Contingency* : "The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity." (192)

His version of the public/private split is centered around separating two moral projects: obligations to the self and to others. This is a departure from the more traditional view that characterized the public as the realm of obligation, and the private as the realm of benevolence or prudence. Rorty encourages the privatization of philosophy to serve only private needs and keep out of the political sphere. Rejecting of the notion of liberalism as having or needing philosophical foundations, along with the idea of a strict distinction between morality and prudence leads Rorty to argue for the impotence of philosophical *Ideologiekritik*, while denying any special realm such as that of universal moral obligations, which can be only addressed through moral philosophical theorizing. Such matters, he argues, can be dealt with by more practical modes of cultural activity. He does not deny that there are such things as moral obligations, but he does deny that they can be captured under a single, blanket theory. Thus philosophical theories serve no useful public role, both because the public realm (on Rorty's reading) moves along without metaphysical justification, and because there is no separate moral realm distinct from a realm of prudential consideration that requires rules different in kind from those formulated, through trial and error, in the community at large.

The implication for philosophy on this view is that it needs simply reigning in to serve only private needs, such as the search for a good life (a project Rorty labels 'the search for private perfection'). Philosophy, on Rorty's view, is not relevant for public life in a liberal society. In his view, "theory has become a means to private perfection rather than to human solidarity."[4] (96) This judgment depends in part on his characterization of philosophy, which is simply that contemporary philosophy is either metaphysical, and thus regressive from the modern liberal's perspective, or it is ironist, and hence irrelevant on a public level.

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[4] Cf. Rorty's comments in "Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein", where Rorty comments on the usefulness of philosophical theorizing: "[theory's] main use lies, I suspect, in thinking through our utopian visions." *Political Theory* 15(4), p. 569. Chapters five and six of *Contingency* are devoted to exploring the works of ironists who do philosophy rather than write literature, and the problems they invariably encounter. These chapters buttress, for the most part, Rorty's hasty equating of philosophy with theory, and theory with metaphysics; this leads to a dismissal of theory even for private purposes. However, such reduction is (as I shall argue in chapter three, below) at cross-purposes with his larger goals, and is absent from his other writings, most notably, from "Thugs and Theorists".

If one were to accept Rorty's anti-foundationalist liberalism, one might find that it is a useful improvement over the Kantian alternative: Rorty's concern for practical matters leads him away from the search for justifications for liberalism in favour of improving one's ability to be liberal. His position, (that of the 'liberal ironist') provides a useful kind of cultural holism where curiosity about dichotomies and theories is replaced by curiosity about strange and interesting people. But the ironist position looks to many suspiciously like older positions (such as 'aestheticism') that have been indifferent, if not hostile to liberalism.[5] While Rorty does not deny this, he does try to placate these fears by distinguishing between an idea's neutrality regarding the question of liberalism and that idea's utility to a liberal agent, and by reference to the division between the public and the private. The fact that an idea is useful to liberalism's enemies as well as its friends is a fact that troubles the metaphysician, but not Rorty. His aim is to show how adopting certain views *for liberal purposes* can aid in the task of preserving a free society, and help augment and extend that freedom. Thus, the two main questions to ask are 'is this interpretation of private ironizing activity coherent?' and 'does this activity make a positive contribution to liberal life, whether public or private, or both?'

The question of how coherent Rorty's picture of ironism actually is is best answered through an exploration of the private realm of Rorty's liberal utopia, for "Irony seems inherently a private matter" (87), and it is in the private realm of 'self-creation' that one best sees Rorty's application of philosophers and authors he calls 'ironists.' Consideration of ironism will begin from the private sphere, but contributions to public life will always be close at hand, for the liberal view of the public sphere is up for redescription, and it is in the public as well as the private sphere that this this skill is cultivated.

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[5] Some of those who see sinister forces at work in Rorty's move towards irony include Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser and Charles Taylor. All these writers share the view that Rorty's portrait of the ironist is that of a type of person who would undermine rather than foster genuine social moral progress. See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1987), whom Rorty discusses in *Contingency*, at 61-69. Fraser's critique can best be found in "From Irony to Prophesy to Politics," *Michigan Quarterly Review,* 30 (Spring 1991) and in "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy" in *Reading Rorty*. Taylor's views, while not dealing explicitly with Rorty, are also worthy of note. See his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989), especially chapters 21-25.

The problems of both old and new descriptions of liberal life are not ignored by Rorty. Indeed, his suggested redescription of liberalism is prompted by the problems he sees with a foundationist, or metaphysical attitude towards what he calls 'the rhetoric of liberalism.' (53) Rorty thinks the problems of ironist misanthropy and the cultural relativism of 'wet' liberals, can be circumvented by his non-theoretical account of moral vocabularies and projects, and by careful attention to our shared capacity to suffer pain and humiliation. Part of his project of making his version of liberalism look preferable to existing views is to show how liberal ironists, through their curiosity about strange people and unfamiliar forms of life, contribute to our overall efforts, as a society, to cherish diversity and tolerate differences of opinion.

Rorty's basic task is making ironists, the sort of people J. S. Mill called 'eccentrics,' look more useful than past liberals (such as Mill) did, and simultaneously making them look less harmful than writers like Habermas suspect they are.[6] But, as Rorty says, his defence of the ironist "turns on making a firm distinction between the private and the public", (83) and Rorty's consideration of how such people serve liberal ends may complicate this endeavour significantly. His task of redescribing liberalism in terms favourable to the ironist tends to draw these two spheres closer together, whereas simply defending an ironist's right to be an eccentric on the basis of the state's duty to tolerate diversity seems a much simpler matter. To argue for the intrinsic value of ironism, and to point out its potential use to society is not contrary to the spirit of liberalism, but it is contrary to much of liberal tradition. Rorty uses an analogy of Wittgenstein's--one comparing the different functions of sentences of a language with the different tools found in a tool box--to further undermine the supposed advantages of liberal theory, redescribing his pragmatic ironism in a better light. Appealing to such an picture of linguistic activity allows Rorty to shift the philosophical emphasis from explaining something to figuring out how to use it, and thus aids his case for the uses of ironism. The 'tool analogy', as a metaphor that avoids falling into comfortable dualisms or strict dichotomies, may allow Rorty to circumvent the charge that his favourable description of ironism is at odds with his 'firm distinction' between public and private projects, but it remains to be seen if this device does not create problems of its own.

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[6] Mill's view was that it would be cruel and unjust for the state to censure eccentrics simply for being odd; he had little regard for their potential contributions to liberal society, whereas Rorty thinks they have much to offer. Both would agree that restricting the freedom of the eccentric would be illiberal. For this point I am indebted to S. Turner.

The story of how Rorty gets to a tool analogy as method of situating public and private projects is a simple one: the analogy with tools has proved useful in explaining language, and Rorty, who began his career as a specialist in philosophy of language, finds moral progress to be shaped in part by modification of one's moral vocabulary. The utilization of language is the precondition, for Rorty, for the formation of moral beliefs; changes in linguistic behaviour therefore provide a useful starting point in explaining political evolution.

2.1 The Tool Analogy: from language to politics

In Part One of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein uses a description of a tool box as a pedagogical aid in his remarks on the philosophy of language. In his view, philosophers misunderstand language when they try to explain it terms of a simple picturing relation (as he himself did earlier in his career). The central mistake of philosophers is that they overlook the diversity of functions of words, hence the analogy with something that few would deny is diverse:

> Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.--The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)
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> Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script or print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy![7]

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[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), pt. I, §11.

The problem for Wittgenstein (and for Rorty) of overlooking how languages actually work is aggravated by the search for the essence of language: that is, by the philosophical quest for a basic definition of what language is:

> Imagine someone's saying: "*All* tools serve to modify something. Thus the hammer modifies the position of the nail, the saw the shape of the board, and so on."--And what is modified by the rule, the glue-pot, the nails?--"Our knowledge of a thing's length, the temperature of the glue, and solidity of the box."--Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions?--[8]

Such an extension of a definition to fit unorthodox cases (*viz.* the 'modification' of knowledge, temperature and solidity) seems to do little for our understanding of the subject matter at hand. What is does accomplish is the creation of philosophical problems, new theories to be fleshed out, and new obstacles that stand in the way of seeing how a language functions in its everyday context. Both Rorty and Wittgenstein see philosophy as obstructive, and look to simple analogies like Wittgenstein's tool box to avoid being seduced by elegant theories or definitions.

Wittgenstein's analogy forms perhaps the best known break with representationalist thinking in western philosophy. It undermines the concept of language as a medium of representing known object to knowing subject and substitutes it with a picture of language as part of our ongoing attempt to cope with our physical environment. (Thus, in Rortian terminology, metaphors of picturing are replaced with metaphors of coping to describe language.) In addition, it is anti-theoretical in that it is designed to resist attempts to characterize language by a single definition, or a single function.[9] It is a device that helps one think about language in new and varied ways and avoid the philosophical (specifically epistemological and metaphysical) quandaries Rorty abhors.

The analogy between languages and tools is at the heart of *Contingency*, not simply because it serves as a link between Rorty's background in philosophy of language and his current interests in the philosophy of politics, but because this analogy typifies Rorty's anti-representationalist approach to human artifacts, including the rhetoric of liberalism. The analogy, as formulated by Wittgenstein, was originally devised to circumvent philosophical quibbles over the essence of language. But the analogy seems to work the same way in politics, making questions about how we justify our present aversion of cruelty seem about as fruitful as the question 'how do wrenches wrench?', to borrow a phrase from one of Rorty's essays.[10] Regarding language (and hence beliefs) as tools for coping rather than a medium between known object and knowing mind makes the whole question of ultimate justification seem trivial, or at least uninteresting, in contrast with the practical work at hand. Rorty picks up on this move away from metaphors of mediation and representation (the central theme of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) in comparing the modern views on language which center around either subjective, expressionist paradigms or objective, correspondence-based ones:

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[8] *Philosophical Investigations*, §14.

[9] Cf. Wittgenstein's enumeration of functions of a language in *op. cit.*, §23, 78. As for the question of how one can explain things if theories are inadequate, while Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance' is of some help on this score, it does not seem to provide the same account of phenomena commonly expected from a theoretical model.

> [T]he seesaw battles between romanticism and moralism, and between idealism and realism, will continue as long as one thinks there is a hope of making sense of the question of whether a given language is "adequate" to a task -- either the task of properly expressing the nature of the human species, or the task of properly representing the structure of nonhuman reality. (11)

Rorty thinks a Wittgensteinian/Davidsonian view of language helps circumvent this view of language that straddles skepticism, idealism and realism, for as he notes: "Both [Wittgenstein and Davidson] treat alternative vocabularies as more like alternative tools than like bits of a jigsaw puzzle." (11) Thus a whole range of unproductive, stultifying questions are avoided, and one can turn to matters of how individual vocabularies work in a given environment.

a) Tools and Progress: change for change's sake vs. change for the better

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[10] "Ten Years After" in The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method ed. R. Rorty. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. p. 370. Much of the appeal of Rorty's position turns on this ability to make long-standing (and perhaps unresolvable) philosophical debates seem this unimportant.

Examination of Rorty's application of the tool analogy to politics very quickly comes to involve questions about Rorty's account of moral progress. Without an account of progress, an anti-foundationalist liberalism seems very illiberal, and dangerously close to relativism. Rorty has frequently been accused of quietism, and his work has been interpreted as a apology for the status quo.[11] However, close inspection of his writings reveals that his picture of liberalism is a progressive one and that Rorty does favour change over stasis.[12] His preference for redescription as a philosophical tactic is a good indication against conservatism, as is his basic characterisation of human flourishing: a variant of Nietzsche's notion of self-creation.[13] These are both positions that favour change rather than defend what already is. However, novelty, in and of itself, is an insufficient criteria for progress. If Rorty embraces a 'change for change's sake' view of progress, where the search for novelty, for new tools is of prime importance, he will then have difficulty evading charges of relativism, or at best, naïvité regarding the question of how liberals seek to change their world. Change (as historical events continue to teach us) need not be for the better, and the ability to change, while a useful skill, has no essential connection to serving liberalism. While Rorty does argue that this skill is important for the survival of a liberal society, he does not commit himself to a shallow or relativistic account of progress. Progress implies improvement, and is roughly synonymous with 'change for the better', not merely for the sake of change. Indeed, there is reason to believe that from Rorty's (pragmatic) point of view, many types of change would presumably interfere with progress, but this, he argues, cannot be known beforehand.[14]

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[11] See for example Nancy Fraser, *op. cit.*, Rebecca Comay, "Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty" in *Anti-Foundationalism and Practical Reasoning: Conversations between Hermeneutics and Analysis*, ed. E. Simpson (Edmonton: Academic Printing & Publishing, 1986), and Christopher Norris, "Philosophy as a kind of narrative: Rorty on post-modern liberal culture" in *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and theory after deconstruction*, London: Methuen, 1985.

[12] This is most obvious in his enthusiasm for Dewey's brand of liberalism. However, it is important not to base this claim to progressivism simply on this. While one should not discount an author's self-understanding, Rorty's liberalism should stand or fall on its own merits.

[13] See *Contingency*, chapter two, *passim*.

'Change for the better' seems to involve subordinating our experimentation in a certain way: to our current needs and our current hopes for the future.[15] Here Rorty's tool analogy is telling: progress involves not only novelty but usefulness. New artifacts are to be subordinated to our needs. But it is important to realize that there is a principle of humility in this account as well: experimentation cannot *a priori* be made to suit to our needs and goals: we must select from among our creations what we will employ.[16] Free, uninhibited experimentation is followed by socially-oriented application (this way of putting it puts perhaps too much emphasis on planned modification of society; Rorty sees such modification as a much more accidental affair). To attempt a crude summary, experimentation must be *morally* (and pragmatically) subordinate to notions of need and hope, while not being temporally or logically subordinated to such dimensions of human life.

Rorty's comparison of political language with tools begins in his introduction, not with the public and private realms, but with certain philosophical positions, ones which have been held to be at odds: illiberal, sceptical aesthetes versus socially-conscious critics, each group mistrustful of the other. Rorty attempts to dissolve this controversy by denying the conflict between them, and by tying this conviction to anti-foundationalist antipathy towards ahistorical theories of human nature:

> If we could bring ourselves to accept the fact that no theory about the nature of Man of Society or Rationality, or anything else, is going to synthesize Nietzsche with Marx or Heidegger with Habermas, we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation

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[14] Against relativism, see Rorty's comments in "Pragmatism without method" in ORT, where he says, after giving up belief in absolute ground for evaluation of a web of beliefs, "one is still far from saying that one person's web is a good as another." (67) Cf. his comments in "Inquiry as recontextualization: An anti-dualist account of interpretation" in *op. cit.*, '[the anti-essentialist] is no more free from pressure from outside, no more tempted to be "arbitrary" than anyone else....In the second place, she is not stuck within her own head. At worst, the community of inquirers to which she belongs...is stuck, for the most part, within its own vocabulary. But bemoaning this fact is like bemoaning the fact that we are, for the time being, stuck in our own solar system. Human finitude is not an objection to a philosophical view.' (101-2)

[15] As shall be argued at 59, below, even these needs and hopes are themselves subject to revision.

[16] In this aspect, Rorty is following fairly closely upon the work of Thomas Kuhn.

> between two kinds of tools -- as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars. (xiv)

Rorty uses this comparison of writers to tools to distinguish between public and private projects, eliminating the need for theoretical reconciliation of the two (and this, in a nutshell, is the insight behind *Contingency*):

> One sort of writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe. The other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that responsibility is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language. (xiv)

Both of these moral projects highlight the need for what does not yet exist, either a new way of describing oneself or a new way to live up to our own public convictions. In both cases, existing vocabularies are not doing the job, or at least not as well as we would like. Insofar as we examine vocabularies, our questions should be about how well they serve our purposes, rather than about how to reconcile different ways of speaking by creating a theoretical model: 'We should restrict ourselves to questions like "Does our use of these words get in the way of our use of those other words?" This is a question about whether our use of tools is inefficient, not a question about whether our beliefs are contradictory.' (12) Rorty continues, illustrating the difference he sees between theoretical and practical questions:

> "Merely philosophical" questions, like Eddington's question about the two tables, are attempts to stir up a factitious theoretical quarrel between vocabularies which have proved capable of peaceful coexistence. [Cases like this] are...cases in which philosophers have given their subject a bad name by seeing difficulties nobody else sees. (12)

This passage lends credence to the notion that progress for Rorty cannot be construed merely in terms of novelty, for in this, and in numerous other passages, he emphasizes the importance of not obscuring or complicating moral matters unnecessarily. Progress is to be understood pragmatically, as change which makes a difference for the better. This description of progress highlights the moral priority of a vision of the future, a utopian vision, against which new tools are measured by asking the question: 'will this help us realize our social goal?'

Such a dismissal of philosophical problems may seem to imply a kind of conservatism or similar view that society is functioning smoothly. "But" Rorty insists:

> this is not to say that vocabularies never do get in the way of each other. On the contrary, revolutionary achievements in the arts, in the sciences, and in moral and political thought typically occur when somebody realizes that two or more of our vocabularies are interfering with each other, and proceeds to invent a new vocabulary to replace both. (12)

Here Rorty is not only stressing the connection between need and experimentation, but firmly dismissing philosophical issues in favour of more pressing practical ones. Progress seems, on his account, to be closely linked with the resolution (or circumvention) of practical difficulties. Presumably, attempts at theoretical reconciliation, the creation of 'meta-vocabularies' to supervene upon existing, incompatible ones, does not help the situation.[17] Rorty's development of the notion of creating new tools/vocabularies suggests the greater efficacy of practical tinkering over abstract inference or metaphysical system-building:

> The gradual trial-and-error creation of a new, third, vocabulary -- the sort of vocabulary developed by people like Galileo, Hegel, or the later Yeats -- is not a discovery about how old vocabularies fit together. That is why it cannot be reached by an inferential process -- by starting with premises formulated in the old vocabularies.

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[17] Such a creation probably hampers the search for a new, usable vocabulary, as the philosophical meta-vocabulary simply adds to the total number of co-existing vocabularies; furthermore, it is an attempt to reduce other vocabularies to its terms, (or worse, dictate from outside how people should employ them) rather than an attempt to meet the needs going unfulfilled. On this reading, the dismissal of 'merely philosophical' problems is in the name of progress, pragmatically conceived.

> Such creations are not the result of successfully fitting together pieces of a puzzle. They are not discoveries of a reality behind the appearances, of an undistorted view of the whole picture with which to replace myopic views of its parts. The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools. To come up with such a vocabulary is more like discarding the lever and the chock because one has envisaged the pulley, or like discarding the gesso and tempera because one has now figured out how to size canvas properly. (12)[18]

This holistic approach coheres with Rorty's anti-foundationalism and his pragmatism: the avoidance of prioritizing topics or tools beforehand allows a better chance of a 'better fit' of new tools and existing needs.

It is important to note that Rorty does not place much, if any, emphasis on the idea of progress as a guide to action. Progress is something we evaluate retrospectively, in judging the change from past to present to be a good one. As he points out, treating cultural artifacts like tools means paying less attention to evaluation in terms of progress and more attention to our actions themselves. "We cannot see Christianity or Newtonianism or the Romantic movement or political liberalism as a tool while we are still in the course of figuring out how to use it." (55) But he goes on to discuss how we do talk in terms of progress:

> But once we figure out how to use the vocabularies of these movements, *we can tell a story of progress*, showing how the literalization of certain metaphors served the purpose of making possible all the good things that have recently happened. (55, emphasis added.)

Relegating the progress notion to a solely retrospectively evaluative role accomplishes several important goals for Rorty. Not using this idea to gauge present activities keeps the liberal society open to the contingencies beyond human control. This is important not simply because our predictions might fail (such a view of social progress is seemingly doomed by the complexity of predicting future change), but because it leaves our notion of beneficial future change open to revision. This is an important move for Rorty: the subjection of utopian visions to revision and reformation. The importance of utopias in relating present action to future is left undiminished, for on Rorty's view, the notion of hope is central to solidarity and progress. But not deciding ahead of time what constitutes 'progress' is itself--when viewed retrospectively--a move in the right direction.

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[18] The realist tone of these last two examples is especially noteworthy, reinforcing the commonsensically realist dimension of pragmatism mentioned in chapter one, above, p. 32n41.

b) Irony and holistic progress: Changing and staying the same

There is, arguably, yet another aspect to Rorty's notion of progress, one which fits nicely with his pragmatism and his vision of a liberal utopia. Progress includes a kind of non-static, or dynamic, holism, where methods of inquiry and habits of action are themselves subjected to experimentation and revision.[19] Pragmatism's central social function, he argues, "has been to break through the crust of convention, to favor receptivity to the new rather than attachment to the old".[20] Following Rorty's Davidsonian view of language, the passage of time turns 'live' metaphors, which catch our attention, into dead ones which contribute to our everyday, literal form of speaking. Thus habits spring up, as part of our way of coping with the world; but as they become entrenched, as a 'method' or rule for acting, the experimentation takes place along predictable lines, and change for the better becomes threatened on the grounds of decreasing chances for 'a good fit' between action and need. Overcoming this requires a type of holism, one which subjects rules and criteria to occasional stress so that boundaries between domains within (and between) cultures remain provisional and flexible. Thus the need to 'break through the crust of convention' is perpetual. As Jo Burrows comments, political exchange, which Rorty calls 'conversation', "is essentially a creative endeavour, akin, at its best, to poetry; and, as such, it requires language which is fresh."[21] Thus the struggle to keep 'live' metaphors floating around the cultural conversation is not a trivial matter. "The antidote to the 'freezing-over of culture,'" write commentators Guignon and Hilley, "is to create an environment in which new forms of abnormal discourse constantly spring up."[22] On this interpretation, Rorty might well be seen to endorse Bertolt Brecht's characterization of aesthetic activity: "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

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[19] Like Rawls' notion of reflective equilibrium, to which Rorty occasionally appeals, this notion of dynamic holism entails an ideal situation of unending alteration and experimentation, rather than a final conclusion of such cultural activities. The liberal version of such holism is simply one that includes the hope that such tinkering becomes less and less likely to harm others. Rorty's rejection of the 'convergence of inquiry' view of progress is his central disagreement with classical pragmatists like Pierce. For a criticism of Rorty's view see C. G. Prado, *The Limits of Pragmatism* (New York: Humanities Press, 1987).

[20] "Pragmatism without method" in ORT, p. 63.

[21] Jo Burrows, "Conversational Politics: Rorty's Pragmatist Apology for Liberalism" in *Reading Rorty*, p. 322.

Even the tenets of liberalism are up for grabs on this score, and Rorty demonstrates a willingness to embrace a new vision of political hope if one is created.[23] This assertion that Rorty's idea of progress involves a dynamic holism finds support in Rorty's essay "Pragmatism without method", where he argues against the idea that "one ought to formulate general methodological principles, that one has a duty to have a general view about the nature of rational inquiry and a universal method for fixing belief."[24] This notion of the contingency of liberalism is also supported in his notion of what is means to be an ironist. For, following Schumpeter's definition, recognizing the 'relative validity of one's beliefs' would presuppose the possibility of those beliefs one day being superseded by a more plausible, or relatively valid, set of beliefs. One final look at Rorty's comments against method may illuminate this notion of liberal beliefs as a coping strategy (rather than as the true method for bringing about what Pierre Trudeau called 'the Just Society'):

> If one takes the core of pragmatism to be its attempt to replace the notion of true beliefs as representations of "the nature of things" and instead to think of them as successful rules for action, then it becomes easy to recommend an experimental, fallibilist attitude, but hard to isolate a "method" that will embody this attitude.[25]

Here Rorty's anti-foundationalism and his pragmatism coincide in a kind of holism that resists methodization, and preserves an open field of exchange in which a pluralistic culture may flourish. Also noteworthy are his comments in "The priority of democracy to philosophy", where he makes a case for the ironist's role in this cause: "Moral commitment, after all, does not require taking seriously all the matters that are, for moral reasons, taken seriously by one's fellow citizens. It may require just the opposite. It may require trying to josh them out of the habit of taking those topics so seriously."[26] Presumably this is warranted because someone holds those beliefs seriously enough to interfere with their ability to be tolerant of others. Rorty expands this point, reinforcing his rejection of the morality/prudence distinction:

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[22] Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hilley, "Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality" in *ibid.*, p. 344.

[23] See especially his essay "Unger, Castoriadis, and the Romance of a National Future" in EHO, and "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation: A response to Jean-François Lyotard" in ORT, especially p. 291.

[24] "Pragmatism without method" in ORT, p. 67.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.

> More generally, we should not assume that the aesthetic is always the enemy of the moral. I should argue that in the recent history of liberal societies, the willingness to view matters aesthetically--to be content to indulge in what Schiller called "play" and to discard what Nietzsche called "the spirit of seriousness"--has been an important vehicle of moral progress.[27]

This rejection of 'the spirit of seriousness,' the refusal to write off the aesthetic realm as the enemy of moral progress, is a defining mark of the ironist, and in this passage, Rorty makes a case for the ironist's service to the liberal cause. His emphasis on play is best understood as the recognition that traditional rules and forms of discourse may inhibit genuine moral change for the better; that institutions need not be treated solemnly by virtue of their persistence; and that a certain irreverent attitude may help new traditions emerge that are less cruel or oppressive.[28] For Rorty, progress is a serious affair, but seriousness may not always be the most profitable course of action.

This dynamic form of holism brings a certain humility: it is a form of fallibilism, stemming from a recognition of contingency and the benefits of lacking a predetermined method to rely upon. It is a form of what Konstantin Kolenda calls 'coping', which, he suggests, 'acknowledges the "holistic" sense of our dealing (coping) with the world.'[29] This is in contrast to 'theory' which, as Rorty sees it, is precisely the kind rigid style of inquiry we ought to avoid.

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[26] "The priority of democracy to philosophy" in ORT, p. 193. This does not mean, however, that we should not take those people seriously. See section 2.2, below, on ironism and cruelty.

[27] Ibid., pp. 193-4. Cf. Richard Shusterman, "Postmodernist Aestheticism."

[28] This 'anything goes' kind of cultural experimentalism has a parallel in Paul Feyerabend's philosophy of science. See his *Against Method*, Third Edition, (London: Verso 1993) for details.

[29] K. Kolenda, *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990), p. 22.

Kolenda makes much of this notion of coping, construing it as part of Rorty's move towards a Wittgensteinian, functional relationship to inquiry, which subordinates the construction of models to the needs of human life, and tends to blur traditional distinctions between moral, scientific and artistic endeavours. Kolenda emphasizes the interdependence of these cultural activities, and considers this dynamic holism an important part of social progress: "The notion of coping is likely to enlarge the scope of exploratory activity and spread it more widely among all kinds of intellectuals".[30] He sees the shift from metaphors of contemplation to those of coping (a form of activity) to be a seminal event in the development of our self-understanding. The poetic redescription that has taken place in contemporary philosophy, attributed to writers like Wittgenstein, has enabled those that follow him to deal more effectively with their environment (in this case, avoiding rigid departmentalization of the modes of human inquiry),[31] and look back at his work as an event contributing to progress: part of what got our culture from a past form of life, to our present, and by our lights, more adequate, form of life.

c) Public and Private: Different tools for different purposes

To return to Rorty's distinction between the public and the private, the use of the tool analogy to separate private from public projects and vocabularies is Rorty's main innovation regarding political philosophy, enabling him to draw together diverse authors to create a flourishing, pluralistic approach to literary works without subjecting each author to a single overarching principle of public utility. Thus, in attempting to debunk the notion that philosophers like Nietzsche are politically dangerous, Rorty is appealing to a pluralistic account of usefulness that meshes nicely with liberal toleration. He sees himself as differing from writers like Habermas who dismiss the personal, literary domain of philosophy as pernicious, though he does this mostly by claiming such works are irrelevant to debates in the public sphere: "Whereas Habermas sees the line of ironist thinking which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida as destructive of social hope, I see this line of thought as largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions." But rather than simply discounting such writers, he continues, outlining ways in which such writers are useful: "Ironists theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics." (83) This is, in fact, the theme on which *Contingency* draws to a close; Rorty sees a sort of progress in philosophy in the recognition that the ethical questions with which we grapple are diverse, and that this should not be seen as undesirable:

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[30] K. Kolenda, *Ibid.*, p. 25. His discussion of coping occurs in Chapter one, pp. 22-26.

[31] Whether this rigidity has, in fact, been avoided in modern universities, is highly debatable. Regarding the discipline of philosophy, Rorty is singularly pessimistic. In an unpublished essay entitled "Tales of Two Disciplines", presented at the University of Alberta on Oct. 8, 1993, Rorty expressed his cynicism regarding the future prospects of philosophy departments: his feeling was that the inability of philosophers to adopt this holistic attitude towards their own discipline would be their undoing.

> Distinguishing these questions ["Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?" from "Are you suffering?"] makes it possible to distinguish public from private questions, questions about pain from questions about the point of human life, the domain of the liberal from the domain of the ironist. It thus makes it possible for a person to be both. (198)

The pluralism liberals (in principle) endorse makes this an appealing rather than an unfortunate picture of a human life. One need not reconcile different parts of that life under a single theory. Writings irrelevant to politics may be valued for their own sake, and for their contribution to a fuller lived experience. Much of the middle of *Contingency* is devoted to showing how such writings contribute to the personal sphere of liberal life, and arguing that people who have these more or less distinct moral projects--Mill's 'eccentrics'--are in fact good liberals who often do positively contribute to the society in which they live.

2.2 Privitizing Aestheticism?: The Case of the Ironist

At first glance, the private activity of interest to Rorty is unusual: aesthetic rather than moral enterprises are what he considers important. Poetry, or 'poetizing activity' (conceived broadly as the activity of making new metaphors, contributing to the formation of new paradigms[32]) is what Rorty considers important to the private domain of the liberal ironist. The question thus arises: why does poetry matter? The short answer is, poetry matters because it is crucial to the ongoing process of building 'the rhetoric of liberalism.' (53) Poetizing is a revolutionary, or redescriptive activity, and for Rorty this means it is a source to re-orient our self-images to better align themselves with our needs. Poets, through their literature, provide us with examples of possible forms of life which we may use as models to guide our own search for the form we wish our own lives to take. On Rorty's view, it is these concrete alternatives, rather than philosophical arguments, that move people to change.

For Rorty, such poetic creators are a valuable reminder of our own contingency, and hence valuable to the liberal society seeking to free itself from its own theological and foundationalist beginnings:

> It [the liberal utopia] is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did. (61)

It is important to realize that in Rorty's view of culture, literature has gradually replaced religion and philosophy as the field intellectuals consider central to liberal culture[33], but the role played by literature is not a justificatory one. Literature, rather, is the source of new options, new ways of seeing, and thus a prime source of moral progress: "Ironists read literary critics, and take them as moral advisors, simply because such critics have an exceptionally large range of acquaintance. They are moral advisers not because they have special access to moral truth but because they have been around." (80)

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[32] For Rorty's stipulative definition, which I follow, see *Contingency*, p. 24n, where the term 'poet' is extended "so that Proust and Nabokov, Newton and Darwin, Hegel and Heidegger, also fall under the term." Viewed this way, 'poet' refers to any redescriber who, in some memorable way, 'breaks through the crust of convention'. Cf. Rorty's enumerations at 17, 76, and 81 for some sense of how his notion of poetizing blurs traditional boundaries. This is due largely, I believe, to his fusion of Davidson and Kuhn.

[33] See his comments at 52, where he claims that the recession of science to the background of cultural life "is not something to be deplored but, rather, something to be coped with. We can do so by switching attention to the areas which *are* at the forefront of culture, those which excite the imagination of the young, namely, art and utopian politics."

Literature (which is, for Rorty, the place where new language is made) is not only a fund for the redescribing of one's private life, but for the reshaping of public rhetoric as well. This is a broadening of the traditional realm of 'the aesthetic', but as Rorty points out, such a subordination of the merely literary to that of moral argumentation presupposes the distinction between the public, moral realm and the private, merely prudential realm that Rorty has tried to undermine. (82) The view "that novels and poems are irrelevant to moral reflection", or are subordinate to it, "takes for granted most of the oppositions which I claimed...have become impediments to the culture of liberalism." (ibid.)

Konstantin Kolenda (a sympathetic commentator) identifies another assumption that makes it easy to think of poetizing as irrelevant to political or moral progress: "The assumption here seems to be that whatever is a contingent product or has originated in a metaphor is thereby disqualified from contributing to language or to moral wisdom."[34] But Kolenda continues, pointing out that this conjecture runs counter not only to common sense, but to a naturalistic view of language. Such a supposition, he argues, "implausibly suggests that a vocabulary that eventually resulted in generating philosophical concepts and theories--epistemological, metaphysical, or moral--was metaphor-free, and that the concepts comprising such theories had unambiguous literal meanings to begin with."[35] For Kolenda then, Rorty's claim appears rather uncontroversial: metaphors are not a superfluous part of language, they are, rather, the source of new ways of speaking. Nor does literal language supervene upon the non-literal as something more 'truthful' or a more legitimate form of language: following Davidson, the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical is the distinction between old and new; between the familiar and the striking.

Following such a naturalistic view of language, Rorty argues for the usefulness of poetic activity for redescription of our moral projects. He urges that different writers be consulted for public and private projects, rather than trying to find one book, one system that provides a theoretical unification of these two areas of life. Consider, for example, his chapter in *Contingency* on

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[34] Konstantin Kolenda, "Misreading Rorty" *Philosophy and Literature* 15 (1991), p. 111.

[35] *Ibid.*

Nabokov, designed to illuminate the role his novels play in making us aware of our own unintentional cruelty; or the chapter on Orwell that follows, highlighting the ways in which the institutions of government (even a liberal government with the best of intentions) can lead to cruelty. But perhaps Rorty's best comments on the roles of different authors comes not from *Contingency*, but from an article entitled "Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein":

> I think that we should see philosophy as, roughly, a branch of literature. Some philosophers (Mill, Dewey, Rawls, Habermas) write books that are relevant to current political practice, as do some novelists (e.g., Hugo, Zola, Dickens, Solzhenitsyn, Orwell). Other philosophers (e.g., Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein) do not, as other novelists (e.g., Virginia Woolf, Proust, Nabokov) do not. Philosophers whose writings are not relevant to current politics (but, at most, to political utopias) are not automatically "irresponsible," nor are they automatically to be assigned to the political right.[36]

This passage shows Rorty at his best, clearly revealing his tool analogy approach regarding writers, while not relegating novelists and philosophers to opposite sides of a good/evil dichotomy, respectively. Things in *Contingency* are unfortunately drawn somewhat more crudely: his rhetoric there is much more polarized, due in part to the fact that *Contingency* constitutes something of a polemic against foundationalism in political philosophy. Many passages in that book seem to relegate all philosophers to the private side of the public/private split.[37] The above passage from "Thugs and Theorists" (an essay devoted to clarifying his political position rather than his philosophical one) also highlights Rorty's stand against accusations of aestheticism, and his rejection of the (Marxian) view that those who do not devote their creative activity solely to public concerns must thereby be against social reform.[38] Having sketched out this 'division of labour' between different writers and moral projects, it is worthwhile to consider the unique position the ironist occupies regarding her own moral projects, and the tools she uses to realize them.

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[36] Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein" in *Political Theory 15* (4), November 1987, p. 572.

[37] See, for example, his argument in chapter five, where he argues that ironist philosophers are private philosophers, and then goes on to show how novelists like Proust perform the same private function with fewer metaphysical hangups. (He characterizes the project of ironist theorizing as "hopeless" at 120.) On such a view it is hard to see how philosophy, ironic or not, has any future whatsoever.

a) Ironism, final vocabularies, private perfection

Rorty's link between private and public activity centers around a person's language use and sense of selfhood. "All human beings," he writes, "carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives." Rorty goes on to call this collection of words 'a person's "final vocabulary."' (73) He explains his coinage: 'It is "final" in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their use has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force.' Thus the final vocabulary consists of words which form the center of gravity of a person's justificatory scheme regarding morality; this vocabulary is also that in terms of which people form their self-descriptions: "we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary." (80) A final vocabulary, then, is a crucial part of a person's toolbox for coping with life. One's attitude towards one's final vocabulary is of singular importance for Rorty, and it is around this aspect of human life that he offers his most detailed account of what it means to be an ironist:

> I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies...(2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. (73)

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[38] This idea is directly attributable to Lenin, not Marx. Lenin's notion of the partisan nature of all activity, which he called *Partiinöst*, or 'party-ness', however, has become part of the common world-view of many Marxian theorists. I owe knowledge of this to David Bakhurst of Queen's University.

This puts an ironist in a unique position vis-à-vis her final vocabulary: she doubts the veracity of her vocabulary, that is, she doubts it captures the world 'as it really is', yet she realizes that she cannot eliminate this doubt through reason, for the final vocabulary is the set of tools that makes such reasoning possible. Such a person moves about the world with a certain amount of self-consciousness: the ironist does not rely on her final vocabulary in the same steadfast way the non-ironist does, yet she relies on it nonetheless. The ironist is "impressed by other vocabularies," and finds the quest for facility in dealing with diverse vocabularies, and the search for more novel ones, a replacement for the (presumably fruitless) attempt to assuage her doubts about the vocabularies she was brought up using.

If this description of the state of mind of the ironist sounds somewhat precarious, this is intentional. Rorty considers the ironic attitude to be somewhat awkward, something of a juggling act between two activities--doubt and action--that cannot be abandoned. He rounds out his picture of the ironist with an idea that brings this portrait closer to the traditional understanding of irony:

> I call people of this sort "ironists" because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad be being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves. (73-74)[39]

Thus ironists are aware of a certain instability (or fluidity) in their own webs of belief, while non-ironists, whom Rorty calls 'metaphysicians,' see themselves as approaching stability, finality and truth. Both refine their final vocabularies, but the ironist is the sort of person whom, Rorty says, can "face up" to the contingency of her language and thus of her sense of self. (9) But such people are capable--should they so choose--of holding liberal beliefs. As Rorty puts it, in a passage that ties several ideas together:

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[39] Recognition of the fragility of one's final vocabulary is, on this view, akin to the recognition of the tenuous nature of the liberal polity. As I have suggested above (sec. 1.1) this awareness might lead to a renewed sense of the importance of preserving such a way of life. Although Rorty does not take this line in defence of liberalism, it is interesting to note his attitude toward various parts of human culture: liberalism is to be in some sense preserved, but one's original final vocabulary is to be rebuilt in favour of a more diverse one.

> [T]he citizens of my liberal utopia would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community. They would be liberal ironists--people who met Schumpeter's criterion of civilization, people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment. (61)

All that remains now is to show not only that liberalism and ironism are compatible, but that ironism does not inherently lead to cruelty, and that it instead is a more useful tool to the liberal cause than metaphysics.

b) Aestheticism, redescription, cruelty

As Rorty mentions, the talent for redescription, so important to his account of moral change, is not seen by all as a beneficial skill. He cites Habermas as one philosopher among many who "thinks of the contextualism and perspectivalism for which I praised Nietzsche...as irresponsible subjectivism." (83) But on Rorty's view such a skill is--like all learned behaviours--neither inherently good nor bad, but can be put to ends considered moral or immoral by a given community. But when one looks at what past ironist writers have done, their actions have been most often unconcerned with the greater good, and frequently harmful to the common weal. Rorty does not deny this: "the fact that greater openness, more room for self-creation, is the standard demand made by ironists on their societies is balanced by the fact that this demand seems to be merely for the freedom to speak a kind of ironic theoretical metalanguage which makes no sense to the man in the street." (88) Thus, on first glance, if metaphysical philosophy seems ineffective in the public realm, at least it has the virtue of being innocuous. Ironist philosophy, on the other hand, seems to threaten to take attention away from truly pressing public matters in favour of making life easier for artists and philosophers. The common view of ironists, as Rorty sees it, is far from favourable: 'This sense that the connection between ironism and liberalism is very loose, and that between metaphysics and liberalism pretty tight, is what make people distrust ironism in philosophy and aestheticism in literature as "elitist."' (89) Thus the charge that ironism tends towards illiberal ends is an important one for Rorty to overcome, for even though, in the hands of demagogues, movements with metaphysical justifications have been put to illiberal ends, nonetheless, "we cannot mention [non-ironist doctrines such as] Marxism, Christianity or utilitarianism without respect. For there was a time when each served human liberty. It is not obvious that ironism ever has." (ibid.) Rorty's task is, therefore, to show how ironism can contribute to the proliferation of human freedom, on a level that means something for everyone.

Rorty takes the charge of elitism seriously, and he is willing to investigate the way in which ironism can tend towards cruelty. "Although" he warns, "some of these inferences may be fallacious and some of these assumptions [about ironism] ungrounded, nevertheless there is something right about the suspicion which ironism arouses." (89) Redescription, the paradigmatic activity of the ironist, is an activity that has powerful consequences, consequences that affect not only the ironist, but those she redescribes:

> Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescription. *But most people do not want to be redescribed.* They want to be taken on their own terms--taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. *There is something potentially very cruel about that claim.* For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless. (89, emphasis added)

Redescription has the potential to inflict harm because a person's sense of self (derived in part from her final vocabulary) can be infringed upon when familiar points of reference are called into question. Rorty notes that this is nothing unique to ironists, that "redescription and possible humiliation is no more closely connected with ironism that with metaphysics." He remarks that redescription is an activity common to intellectuals generally (90), and thus the ironist is no more potentially cruel simply by performing this function. The difference lies, according to Rorty, in the fact that metaphysicians justify such redescribing by reference to a theory of human nature: their idea of what that person *truly* is. The ironist, with her lingering doubts about the adequacy of her final vocabulary, "offers no similar assurance." (90) Because the ironist recognizes the contingency of human welfare, and doubts the possibility of settling on a final vocabulary that will ensure that welfare; she seems to undermine one's hope for the future and one's sense of identity. Rorty suggests "that what the ironist is being blamed for is not an inclination to humiliate but an inability to empower." (91) He goes on to provide such an ability to empower by considering the practical ends to which ironists tend to turn their attention, and to the special skill ironists employ that he thinks does empower people.

c) Privacy, humiliation, imaginative acquaintance

Giving people the power to reshape their lives in a positive manner is well within the reach of the ironist. Her redescribing activity, borne out of her continual self-doubt, can be put to liberal ends. Furthermore, a person with tools to realize this goal, on Rorty's view, has more to offer than the person who seeks to justify this goal. Rorty makes this point with reference to ironists and metaphysicians:

> The liberal metaphysician wants our *wish to be kind* to be bolstered by an argument....The liberal ironists just wants our *chances of being kind,* of avoiding the humiliation of others, to be expanded by redescription. She thinks that recognition of a common susceptibility to humiliation is the *only* social bond that is needed. (91)

Rorty asserts that the ironist can improve our chances of being kind; presumably this improvement of one's ability to notice suffering depends in part upon an ability to re-contextualize a situation. This supports the claim that irony involves a certain kind of perceptive (not only descriptive) ability. The ironist augments her own ability to notice and avoid cruelty by broadening her own "skill at imaginative identification" (93), and she likewise contributes to society insofar as she contributes to others' similar improvement. Inadequacies in our coping strategies, or doubts about our self-images or the morality of our society "can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance." (80) Thus redescription serves a useful role in the public sphere: it is an exercise in 'imaginative acquaintance.' But, because of the possible odious consequences of redescribing others, it is curtailed. In Rorty's terms, aestheticism, or radical, unrestrained redescription as practiced by ironist theorists like Nietzsche and Heidegger, becomes something people should "privatize." (197) Rorty relates this in a unique way:

> For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. *My private purposes, and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business.* (91, emphasis added)

Rorty not only invokes the public/private distinction to protect the possible victims of invidious redescription, but to protect the ironist's right to continue to redescribe, free from moral blame, in the private sphere. Rorty backs this up with reference to his pluralistic account of moral projects, and with a reminder that such private concerns do not--in and of themselves--constitute one's moral concerns:

> But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated. So the liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies. (91-2)

In so doing, Rorty also reinforces how this ironic re-contextualization of situations can augment a person's ability to fulfil her moral goals, public and private. Ironist literary sources can serve two distinct ends: personal edification, or increased imaginative identification for public purposes. Ironists must balance these two domains of moral obligation; part of this effort entails resisting the tendency to prioritize one domain over the other, for "that distinction between a central, shared, obligatory portion and a peripheral, idiosyncratic, optional portion of one's final vocabulary is just the distinction which the ironist refuses to draw." (92) Thus poetizing, redescriptive activity, as it contributes to the kind of comprehension required to realize the liberal ironist's desires to notice cruelty and to refurbish her final vocabulary in order to cope with her doubts, is more than just an edifying part of liberal culture. Poetizing is that which empowers people to realize their own desires to be good liberals.

Ironism, characterized simply as a dialectical skill at redescription, seems to have a closer connection with noticing cruelty than Rorty's definition suggests. He seems to consider ironism as a source of special insight into one's situation: as a useful way of seeing. This leads to a consideration of one aspect of Rorty's notion of irony that has gone unnoticed, namely its basis on a certain kind of perception: of connections between things, rather than simply of things themselves. To consider the ordinary understanding of 'irony', detecting irony in speech requires knowing that the speaker's meaning is opposite to the literal meaning of his utterance. Likewise, spotting irony in the world requires some knowledge of the context that makes two or more events constitutive of an ironic situation. If, for example, a man who, before walking down a dark alley, puts his money in his shoe, proceeds to lose his shoe while running away from someone he thought to be a mugger, one has to know all this (including his desire--now frustrated--to keep his money) to see the irony of the situation. To 'see the irony' in this, one must recognize the connection between an agent's intentions, his actions and the outcome.

But, one can perceive all this and still not see the irony of the pedestrian's loss. One can see that these events have taken place without seeing the situation as an ironic one. An analogous situation occurs in optical illusions: the famous Venn illustration (comprised alternately of a vase, or two faces in profile) epitomizes this change in perception, this re-Gestalting, that goes unnoticed in our everyday coping with experience. Wittgenstein characterizes these two types of seeing as 'continuous seeing', or contextualized perception, versus 'seeing as', which might be described as 'proto-contextual,' or "the 'dawning' of an aspect."[40] 'Seeing as' requires a suspension of judgment, a detachment from one's own habits of perceiving, in order to see a familiar object as something else. While Wittgenstein makes this point with regards to perception, his thoughts can be extended, through Davidson's account of how metaphors function, to Rorty's position on language.

Dealing with the ironic involves, for Rorty, dealing with metaphors, which are "ways of producing effects on your interlocutor." (14) Presumably, the desired effect is to look at a given situation in a different way. Much of Rorty's talk about progress revolves around thinking about aspects of the human condition in new ways: dropping the view of language as a medium; rejecting the notion that liberal culture stands in need of philosophical justification; coming to think of metaphors, and not literal speech, as the parts of language that bring about progress. Given this view, there seems to be some affinity between pragmatism (understood as using 'receptivity to the new' as a way to 'break through the crust of convention') and this ability to 'see as.'

But 'receptivity to the new' is at odds with the development of coping strategies (also a part of pragmatism); as are habits of perception with the ability to make 'Gestalt shifts' between possible interpretations of an object. As is commonly pointed out in the Venn experiments, one must interpret the sensory data one perceives, it is simply impossible to make sense of our world if we constantly waver back and forth between possible interpretations of the simplest shapes, sounds and sensations. Both 'habits' (continuous seeing) and 're-Gestalting' (seeing as) are required for what Rorty would consider successful coping. Each exists in some sense at the expense of the other: irony is 'parasitic' on normal discourse but involves an awareness of contextuality that forms part of the background awareness that makes normal perception possible.[41]

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[40] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part two, section xi, *passim*. The distinction of two kinds of seeing occurs at p. 193. The phrases "continuous seeing", and "the 'dawning' of an aspect" occur at p. 194.

[41] By describing irony as "a certain kind of 'seeing-as,'" I am attempting a rather crude synthesis of Davidson's philosophy of language with Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology. However, as I have argued elsewhere, recent interpretations of both thinkers make this less radical than it might sound. I presented my thoughts on this similarity in a paper entitled "Changing Views: Re-interpreting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ", presented to the Graduate Philosophy Colloquium of the University of Alberta on October 19, 1993.

Does Rorty's technical use of 'irony' support this idea about perception? His choice of the term 'irony' seems to have been based primarily on his desire to convey his rejection of the 'spirit of seriousness' in philosophy; but, in addition to this, it seems to fit nicely with this notion of 'seeing as' in a manner that has the added advantage of cohering with the everyday understanding of what is meant by 'irony.' It is reasonable to conclude that while Rorty did not intend this extension of his stipulative definition, it is coherent with his overall philosophical view.

2.3 Poetry in a 'de-divinized world'

Rorty's interpretation of poetic activity is a rather cursory one, which existing poets may not endorse. He sees poetry an essentially the quest for new and striking metaphors. Rorty's penchant for redescription may permit him to circumvent the charge of inaccurately characterizing poetry: he may be after a new use of the term "poetizing". However it relates to existent poetry, Rorty's notion of the 'strong poet' is interesting for its relation to his talk of the secularization of culture and the linking of metaphysics with religious supernaturalism. Basically, his conception of what it is to be a maker of artifacts that change people's view of their world may not support a firm distinction between poetry and metaphysics. If poetizing involves more than just the creation of striking new metaphors, then there may be a case for a certain affinity between poetry, metaphysics and spirituality. If it does not, then Rorty's definition of the 'strong poet' may suffer from a narrow characterization.

Rorty borrows the term 'strong poet' from Harold Bloom, who characterizes the strong poet as one who triumphs to some degree over the pervasive influence of his predecessors. Bloom describes strong poets as "major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death."[42] The struggle against the pervasive influence of tradition is the poet's 'anxiety of influence,' where the task of poetry is that of overcoming the past: the anxiety the strong poet feels is the "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica."[43] This is a stance that involves awareness of one's self as a product of historical contingencies and a desire to redescribe those contingencies in terms that maximize the poet's autonomy or freedom from those contingencies. It is a desire to create the terms in which one is described, rather than "worship the corpses of [our ancestor's] metaphors," (21) or letting past ways of speaking determine one's self-description. Thus both Rorty's historicism and his progress notion are compatible with the notion of strong poetry.

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[42] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Bloom's image of the strong poet is heavily indebted to Nietzsche and Freud, combining the former's notions of self-creation and redescribing one's predecessors ("turning all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'") with Freud's notions of sublimation and Oedipal struggle. Thus Bloom's brand of historicism is extremely antagonistic compared to the relation to the tradition of earlier critics like T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound.

But while Rorty's use of the 'strong poet' coheres with the progress-oriented narrative he wishes to construct, it may incorporate elements that are either illiberal or metaphysical. The story Rorty tells of the increasing secularization of culture and of the increasing autonomy of individuals may point to a utopia that is neither as diverse nor as ironist as Rorty might like.

a) De-divinizing, Secularization

To say that 'truth is made rather than found' is the first step in a process Rorty calls 'de-divinizing', which involves a revision of our traditional views of language, and more broadly of the relationship between the human subject and the world. (21) Rorty describes the progress of culture in terms of the recognition of its contingency, and the subsequent learning to cope in a world that offers no absolute assurances. This is also a defining feature of the ironist, who "does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself." (73) Here he seems to link the ironist's rejection of a notion of correspondence with the rejection of the notion of 'being in touch with a power not herself.' What Rorty means by this will become clearer through considering what such a power might be for Rorty, and by how belief in non-human powers (one possible working definition of religious faith) would fit in Rorty's liberal scheme.

On the one hand, the use of rhetoric praising 'dedivinization' and 'secularization' may simply point to Rorty's belief--shared by Thomas Jefferson and the rest of the framers of the American Constitution--that the separation of

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[43] Bloom, *Ibid.*, p. 80. Rorty cites this passage in *Contingency*, p. 24.

Church and State has augmented the democratization and liberalization of Western societies.[44] Detaching the rules of public discourse from that of a particular religious tradition has made it possible for a variety of peoples of differing beliefs to coexist and, more importantly, to cooperate on many worthwhile social goals. However, Rorty's notion of the ironist's disavowal of being in contact with a power not herself may do more than simply keep the private vocabulary of religion out of the public sphere; it may imply the abandonment of that way of speaking altogether.

The process of de-divinization is not limited to the exclusion of religious issues from the public, political sphere. Rorty suggests that not only our view of language, but our notions regarding conscience, or sense of self, and community become de-divinized; that is, detached from any view that they come in contact with anything bigger than themselves, as part of the complete recognition of their contingency. (22) In such passages, Rorty urges people to "try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything--our language, our conscience, our community--as a product of time and chance." (22)[45] This process of dedivinization seems to combine the increasing liberal and ironist elements of culture: a good example of how the two are, for Rorty, mutually supportive.

The passage also shows how Rorty identifies metaphysics with religion, through what he sometimes calls "the metaphysical urge" (96). Rorty sees Enlightenment foundationalism as "a survival of the religious need to have human projects underwritten by a nonhuman authority." (52) Thus he tends to pathologize metaphysical projects as modern attempts to provide the kind of solace once provided by dogmatic theology.[46] He sees religion as having two sides, only one of which has been appropriated by metaphysicians. The first is the side which tries to give some account of how all human beings are alike and allied with some divine power. The second side to religion is the desire to avoid inflicting cruelty on human beings, regardless of their nationality or membership in a given favoured class. Metaphysics has (in Rorty's eyes) carried on the former project; liberal ironism can safely leave this behind and concentrate on promoting the latter. (87n)

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[44] Rorty discusses the Jeffersonian attitude towards religious toleration and the separation of Church and State in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" in ORT. Rorty also refers to the rejection of theocratic methods of social organization as an example of progress in "Pragmatism without method" in *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[45] This passage is used by Rorty to describe where he thinks Davidson, Nietzsche and Freud (among others) have taken us. The rather straightforward implication is that Rorty endorses this cultural change.

[46] Cf. his comments at 68: "We do not need to replace religion with a philosophical account of a healing and unifying power which will do the work once done by God."

But Rorty may have trouble justifying this move away from older, 'divinized' views of aspects of the human experience. As Tom Sorell points out, the mere 'freshness' of a nonreligious perspective is insufficient to persuade one that secularization is a good thing: "Rorty plainly implies that the process of dedivinization has been progress, but when it comes to the question of why, he may be unable to go beyond saying that the metaphors that have contributed to divinization have gone stale[.]"[47] Rorty's position does not in fact turn on the mere novelty of a secular viewpoint. It is, rather, part of his diagnosis of Western culture turning away from both religion and metaphysics as sources of public progress and private self-description. Nevertheless, in this issue, his anti-foundationalism precludes anything more than merely portraying religion as, in some sense, obsolete.

By setting up something--the world, one's inner nature, or humanity as such--as a 'quasi divinity,' a thing with an essence to get in touch with, culture moves away from the kind of uninhibited exploration Rorty sees as so crucial to progress. It is a form of prioritizing discourse: dedivinization on this view is part both of ironism and liberalism in that it promotes curiosity over piety, or inquiry without fixed method over inherited habits of action.[48] This is one reason Rorty sees metaphysics and religion as symptoms of the same problem, and why he equates secularization with progress.

b) Ironic use of Christianity -- the 'freeloading atheist'

There are instances where, notwithstanding his depiction of society as secularized, Rorty uses religious rhetoric to back up a point. In the essay "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism", he nicely sums up his liberal brand of ethnocentrism by telling the story of a child found wandering in the woods, the lone survivor of a destroyed civilization: "[this] child..., the remnant of a slaughtered nation whose temples have been razed and whose books have been burned," has, following his ethnocentric conception of values, "no share in human dignity." This is simply Rorty's rejection of the point that simply by virtue of being human (having prehensile thumbs, a certain number of chromosomes, etc.), does a being have certain inalienable rights. But Rorty continues, in order to show the importance of our particular ethnos, and the impotence of metaphysical claims:

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[47] Tom Sorell, "The World from its Own Point of View" in *Reading Rorty*, p. 20.

[48] Of course, what Rorty loses on this score is precisely what philosophers of a more 'conservative' stripe (such as Santayana and T.S. Eliot), as well as communitarians like Charles Taylor, valued: contact with a tradition; learning from the experiences of our ancestors. Theirs is a historicism without 'anxiety of influence.'

> but it does not mean she may be treated like an animal.[49] For it is part of the tradition of *our* community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity. This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully invoked by freeloading atheists like myself, who would like to let differences [regarding the ontological status of human rights] remain "merely philosophical." The existence of human rights, in the sense in which it is at issue in this meta-ethical debate, has as much or as little relevance to our treatment of such a child as the question of the existence of God. I think both have equally little relevance.[50]

This passage is noteworthy not only because it reiterates Rorty's position on the culturally embedded character of moral beliefs and the relevance of particular obligations, like the liberal one to consider outsiders moral patients, but because it highlights Rorty's intriguing and complex relationship to religion.

On the one hand, he seems to admire the religious life for its synthesis of public and private fulfilment, commenting how Christianity (for example) combines private and public virtue, (xiii) construing human perfection in terms of service to others. This synthesis makes Rorty's project unnecessary, but this is not the reason for rejecting traditional spiritual methods for reweaving the pattern of our lives. Rorty's point is an historical one: that in our time such theism has ceased to be a live option for many, and that, as it is not the only solution, it should not be relied upon to the exclusion of more pragmatic alternatives. As he puts it: "For a few such people--Christians (and others) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others--the two sorts of questions come together. For most such, they do not." (143) Traditional religions, it seems, provide an example of how private and public concerns can become one and the same; but this is a far cry from holding them up as the model for conduct.

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[49] Nor is it necessarily to say that animals should be 'treated like animals': presumably we may extend the scope of our moral consideration to include, for example, those non-human animals capable of experiencing pain. This however, requires some re-evaluation of what it means to criticize someone's treatment of another being on the basis of 'brutality', or treating in a fashion befitting an animal. For an example of a way to preserve the force of the accusation, 'you're treating her like an animal!' that allows us to include animals as moral patients, see Ted Benton, "Humanism=Speciesism? Marx on Animals" in Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy: A *Radical Philosophy* Reader, eds. S. Sayers and P. Osborne (London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 235-258.

[50] "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" in ORT, p. 202.

This 'freeloading' redescription or appropriation of a religious vocabulary is consistent with Rorty's view of the modification of cultural artifacts to meet social need, but Rorty may be assuming religion serves no other function than the political and aesthetic needs he sees in modern society. Charles Taylor, for example, thinks the reduction of the religious dimension of life is deplorable (whereas, Rorty presumably sees it as 'something to be coped with'). In a view that mirrors Rorty's concern for diversity, Taylor suggests sacrificing a religious domain for the sake of augmenting an aesthetic one "may be catastrophic, not because [the aesthetic domain] isn't a good, but because there are others which can't be sacrificed without evil."[51] Despite the secularization of western societies, and the redescribing that permits such a reinterpretation (what Rorty calls a 'strong reading') of religious vocabularies, it is not clear that Rorty's relegation of religion to such a subservient role is appropriate, or consistent with his overall pragmatic, pluralistic project.

c) poetry, metaphysics, faith

Rorty's treatment of the private side of religion is fairly esoteric, as he rarely directly addresses the relationship of religious or spiritual attitudes to the search for a fulfilling human life. However, consideration of his treatment of poetry and metaphysics can shed some light on a question of enduring difficulty for liberals. While Rorty does talk of the secularization of western culture, and frequently praises de-divinizing events as constitutive of moral progress, these comments are directed towards developments in the public realm. Rorty actually seems fairly sympathetic to religious matters in "Pragmatism without method", and his treatment of the private issues facing liberals, what one might call 'eudaimonic concerns', are predicated upon a conscious borrowing of religious rhetoric. Rorty even goes so far as to borrow Whitehead's definition of religion ('what should I do with my aloneness?') as the touchstone for his explorations concerning the good life.[52]

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[51] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 503. Taylor, unfortunately, appears to give the same reductive reading of poetry that Rorty sometimes gives of religion, construing poetic attempts to deal with religious projects as doomed from the start. See chapters 24-25 of *Sources*.

Rorty's exegesis of religious attitudes in "Pragmatism without method" is generally sympathetic, as he defends the possible co-existence of spiritual and scientific dimensions of human life against a reductive kind of naturalism. He argues that it makes no sense to accuse someone who holds both a scientistic and a religious view of the world of a kind of "intellectual schizophrenia"[53], as such a view presupposes one should reconcile all of one's projects, everything that engages one's curiosity, under a single method of inquiry. Here Rorty defends a spiritual outlook on the basis of his anti-theoreticism. He resists reducing religion to the terms of the sciences. He also praises religious attitudes which avoid supernaturalism, yet provide a "connection of man with the enveloping world," in a manner similar to the poetic activity he praises in *Contingency*. Referring to envisaging this connection between human being and world, he remarks: "This is what certain forms of art (when not construed romantically and transcendentally as a peep into another world) and certain forms of religion (when not construed as an encounter with a pre-existent power that will rescue us) *do* help us envisage."[54] In this essay, Rorty does not reduce religion to metaphysics or an antiquated attempt to give a *logos* of the world, rather he argues for taking religion on its own terms, acknowledging its possible role in the good life, and rejecting the notion that the various domains of that life should be commensurable within a single vocabulary.

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[52] Taken from *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* p. 13; Rorty also cites this definition in "Thugs and Theorists", p. 572. In the latter the definition is invoked to argue (*pace* Whitehead) for the privatization of religion. In the former work it is invoked to portray Rorty's delineation of the domain of private perfection, with reference to *Contingency*. The best Rorty gives by way of an *answer* to Whitehead's question can be found in *Ibid.*, chapter two.

[53] "Pragmatism without method", in ORT, p. 67.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 74

However, as in the case of his treatment of different writers, his treatment of religion in *Contingency* suffers from a certain lack of subtlety. In addition, his particular vision of the good life (centering on creative autonomy and self-enlargement) seems contrary to many conceptions of spirituality, raising the question of how incidental Rorty's antireligious remarks really are. But perhaps instead of characterizing religion and metaphysics as activities different in kind from ironism (and risk creating an ontological distinction), it would be helpful to look at some elements these three activities have in common.

To consider an alternative account of poetry, it may be helpful to consider the views of someone inside the profession, rather than a philosopher, or a literary critic (such as Bloom). Poet and essayist Denise Levertov has remarked that, as important as imagery is to poetry, it is the formal qualities of the poem that are most important to its aesthetic value, and to the possibility of appreciating that value:

> We have long assumed that it is an aesthetic truism to assert the indivisibility of form and content--but there is a certain amount of hypocrisy in the statement, after all. Perhaps it needs to be reformulated, to say that although inadequate formal expression always diminishes or distorts content, yet form itself can be perceived, admired, and experienced as pleasure or stimulus even when the reader's attention is not held by content. Thus, while content cannot be fully apprehended without a fusion with form equal to its task, form can be apprehended and absorbed in and of itself.[55]

Here is an account of reading poetry that does not revolve around the aspects Rorty cherishes (the recognition of the private and contingent, for example). Moving away from Rorty's characterization of poetry as an activity of self-expression (or of realizing sublimated fantasies) allows one to question his supposition that poetry is the antithesis of metaphysics. The relevance of this point by Levertov is not that Rorty overlooks how poets conceive of their own activity, but that poetry, the conveyance of images and metaphors, depends on a formal structure to help bring about such a connection between poem and reader. Poetry relies much more heavily on form, or 'system' than Rorty allows, and this formal quality, the attention to structure, is shared by metaphysics. Indeed, some of the metaphysical works Rorty would distance himself from, such as Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* are highly poetic, and much attention has been paid not only to their compelling images, but their formal structure.[56] Just as seeing irony requires a special kind of attention to the overall situation, the reception of a poetic image relies to some extent upon the structural integrity of the poem: the integrity or formal clarity of a poem is part of what is necessary for the new metaphor to pass beyond a given work into public use.

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[55] Denise Levertov, "Some Affinities of Content" in *New & Selected Essays*, New York: New Directions, 1992. Cf. Zwicky's criticism of Rorty's account of poetry, *Lyric Philosophy*, §263.

The 'metaphysical urge' which Rorty claims is the downfall of metaphysical theorizing (and which he advises ironist theorists to avoid) may not be the search for something otherworldly he claims it is. It may be no more than be the attempt to explore these 'formal properties': those of poems, scientific theories, or even philosophical models. Even if this is the case, and metaphysics is not a sublimated form of supernaturalism, Rorty might still reject this activity for its focus on formal structure instead of the particular details he sees as crucial to moral progress. However, his account of the futility of looking at structure in the hopes of contributing to progress may be undermined by an account that shows the efficacy of both activities. Following the idea that noticing irony requires noticing something of the structural relationship between objects in a given context, and following Levertov's thought on the necessity of form in poetry, it does not make sense to reject out of hand the relevance of constructing and experimenting with theoretical models. Furthermore, attention to what metaphysics and poetry might have in common loosens the connection between religion and metaphysics (which formed the starting point of Rorty's critique of philosophy), while narrowing the gap between ironism and metaphysics, a distinction he needs to make his case for ironic liberalism. If Rorty is correct, and "[w]hat matters for the liberal ironist is not finding...a reason [to care about the suffering of others] but making sure that she *notices* suffering when it occurs', (93) then it seems at least possible that studying form--in some manner that might qualify as metaphysics--may contribute to this.[57]

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[56] What is surprising here is that Rorty does not come to such a conclusion himself, given his desire to blur the distinction between philosophy and literature.

d) Stoicism: skill, toleration, self-improvement, duty

Rorty's liberal utopia is not one which functions automatically, like a mechanism. Although Rorty endorses procedural justice as all we can ask of the state, he does not endorse a purely procedural, instrumental form of life. Given his views on the changing nature of human culture, such a static view of existence is not only undesirable but implausible. Liberalism does not run itself. It requires the active participation of its citizens. This is one reason why the character of those citizens is relevant to his inquiry. Moreover, it seems that the kinds of people that contribute to the flourishing of a liberal culture are remarkably similar to virtuous characters depicted by many (considerably older) moral views such as stoicism and Christian ethics. It seems in the case of Christianity, Rorty's view is openly parasitic upon this older view, but constitutes a distinct position in its own right. However, in the case of stoicism, the 'freeloading' appropriation is absent, and the affinity between these two positions is great; the distinction between ironism and stoicism is less than clear. Stoicism, properly understood, seems to be a precursor to ironism all but indistinguishable from it. Postmodernism in the style of Rorty, seems (in this regard, at least) to be anything but new.

Stoicism is commonly thought to be an attitude that favours contemplation and resignation; it seems to lack a source of solidarity or of a rich vision of human fulfillment. The stoic is frequently seen as coping with what is beyond her control, but her life is construed as nothing more than such coping, where the task of self-creation is limited to fashioning a self capable to withstanding the contingencies of an indifferent world. However, stoicism is not a passive or resigned attitude as commonly thought: it involves a notion of virtue where the acquisition of skills plays a central role, and it also involves a rich picture of involvement with the world.

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[57] On this view, the gap between metaphysics and ironism need be no wider than that between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' discourse. Metaphysical philosophers might be seen as elucidating formal properties, experimenting with and evaluating different structures, while ironists exploit those structures, doing what they do best by filling them up with striking images. In this way both might contribute to progress.

The Stoics had a strong sense of duty towards others, which combined with their emphasis on toleration, forms an excellent model for citizenship in a liberal society. Furthermore, their emphasis on attaining virtue provides a conception of the self that is geared towards constant self-improvement, another way in which stoicism resembles ironism. The aspects in which the two seem to differ are their relation to theories of human nature, or metaphysics more generally, and the emphasis the ironist places on redescribing as a tool for self-making and social change. But even these differences are not as great as they seem.

Building upon Julia Annas's exegesis of ancient moral philosophy, one can characterize stoicism as something compatible with ironism. As she points out, the stoics were less concerned with metaphysics that other ancient schools, and primarily restricted themselves to an account of human nature that allowed them to extend the realm of moral agency beyond a particular community to humanity as a whole.[58] Thus, the content of stoic morality is strikingly similar to the liberal ethos. Stoicism is concerned with both justice and human reason, construing virtue as a skill, rather than an antisocial, contemplative venture, and it involves a sense of duty towards other human beings, as all human beings share a rational capacity.[59] This founding of a sense of moral duty on rationality may sound like foundationalism, but Annas shows how stoic concern for others is based on an attitude closer to ironic imaginative acquaintance than any metaphysical attitude. The cultivation to the stoic virtues of justice and concern for other human beings depends on a process of *oikeiosis*, alternately rendered as 'making akin to' and 'familiarization.'[60] Through extending one's familiarity with strange groups and persons, the stoic cultivates her sense of duty towards them. Rorty's distinction of the ironist turns on the motivation for concern for others, his emphasis on skill marking the break with foundationalism: "For the liberal ironist, skill at imaginative identification does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation--rationality, or the love of God, or the love of truth." (93) Such a passage applies equally well to stoicism as it was understood in pre-modern times. The resignation seen in stoicism is actually akin to Rorty's anti-metaphysical attitude, where one turns attention away from perennial questions in favour changing life (for oneself, and one's community) for the better.

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[58] Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 405-9.

[60] *Ibid.*, p 262ff.

Why point out these common themes between stoicism and ironism? In part it is to link Rorty's portrait of the ironist to the broader moral tradition, in order to emphasize his continuity with the philosophical tradition. But mainly the comparison serves to clarify what ironism means in terms of moral action: on this view it combines an active, dynamic moral outlook that combines concern for oneself and for others with an uninhibited curiosity about the world--a far cry from either 'quietism' or 'aestheticism'. This search for clarity can in turn contribute to the effort to build upon Rorty's account to give a fuller vision of what it means to be a liberal ironist.

2.4 Conclusion

Is Rorty's firm distinction between public and private projects undermined by the fact that being an ironist appears to be not only a good strategy for coping with one's contingency but for improving one's ability to notice the suffering of others? It seems that the private virtues of curiosity and imaginative identification Rorty describes, part of the project of self-creation, contribute indirectly--but substantively--to the public sphere. In fact, Rorty's account of moral progress seems to demand this interdependence between private and public. The strong poet, through a personal quest for self-creation, serves as part of the vanguard of society by a contingent convergence of private idiosyncrasy and public need. (37) The fact that it is a single person undertaking these two different moral projects confuses matters: while Rorty does give a convincing account of how a person can be both an ironist and a liberal, his attempt to make ironism 'look good' in comparison to metaphysics turns on showing how the ironist contributes positively to moral progress, despite the autonomy of the private project of self-creation. He seems at times to give the kind of unified, all-embracing theoretical account of moral obligation he denies is necessary. Does this in fact occur, and if so, is it damaging to his overall project?

Rorty's overall rejection of theory prompts these questions, and his alternative, the analogy with tools, provides one reason against interpreting him as providing a unified theory of human nature. The tool analogy resists the formation of dichotomies and hence most traditional problems of their interaction,[61] although it does allow a certain blurring of divisions like the one between public and private. To describe these two spheres of action is not to reconcile their workings at the level of theory. Rorty sees the possibility of such reconciliation as a purely contingent matter: a matter of what 'live options' present themselves to a given person in a given culture. But from the exploration of how ironic redescription contributes to moral progress, one may wonder whether ironism itself becomes the rubric under which both private and public activity is explained. Following Rorty's use of the analogy, one may ask whether learning to use various tools like paintbrushes and crowbars reinforce one another, thus forming part of a single activity. However, while skills can become mutually reinforcing, moral projects can remain fairly distinct. Again with reference to tools, skills are exercised through application, and one may still be able to distinguish between private and public ventures regardless of the existence of a common set of tools and skills. Rorty thinks it is fairly clear that some books have no relevance to a particular moral project, just as some books merely provide entertainment, posing no moral or aesthetic riddles for us to solve. (143n) Just as his naturalistic view of language resists firm distinctions between the metaphorical and the literal, or 'revolutionary' versus 'normal' discourse, so does Rorty's pluralistic view of moral projects avoid positing differences in kind, resting instead on the much fuzzier notions of difference in context, function, or utility.

An important point to be made, however, is that perhaps the distinction need not be as clear-cut as Rorty imagines. A more holistic picture would fit nicely with Rorty's overall philosophical outlook, and reference to harm or cruelty caused by redescription provides a satisfactory yardstick for determining the public relevance of a given act. Rorty's pragmatism requires no firmer a distinction that this, but he may have other motives for such a strict separation. He may, however, have good reason to *avoid* a strict separation. As Guignon and Hilley point out, such a strict separation may undermine liberal solidarity by overlooking the influence the public sphere has on the private: "An individual's self-descriptions are realized in his or her agency in the public world, and public practices and institutions impact on the individual's capacities for self-fulfillment."[62] The liberal sense of solidarity should support such a fusion of public and private, as should Rorty's portrait of the ironist's holistic curiosity; to define the self in isolation seems to deny the social nature of language and to bifurcate the ironist's domain of inquiry. Rorty's holism should support such intersubjectivity and pluralism.[63]

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[61] One example of a typical problem faced by liberal theorists regarding the public/private split is that of the role of justice in the private sphere. By treating these two domains as opposites, it has been assumed (most notably by Rawls) that considerations of justice do not apply to the private sphere. This assumption has been questioned by Susan Moller Okin in *Justice, Gender and the Family*. Whether or not justice does in fact enter into our private considerations is, on the traditional view, an 'unaskable question,' as posing this question would seem to erode the distinction itself. Rorty's naturalism circumvents this difficulty, although, disappointingly, he does not address this question of the role of justice in our private lives.

While Rorty's non-theoretical account avoids many of the traditional problems surrounding the division between the private and the public, his view is hampered by a different sort of tension. His polemical project in *Contingency*, consisting of the attempt to promote ironism by odious comparison with metaphysics is at odds with his overall picture of blurring distinctions between genres of writing, and between modes of action. Part of the problem is the conflict between Rorty's holism and his polemical dualism: his invidious distinction between particular depiction and theoretical model is undermined both by his pragmatic instrumentalism (insofar as such models are useful, one would expect Rorty to embrace them), and by the poetic, metaphorical nature of such theories. In his battle to portray a form of life that does not combine public and private projects, Rorty tends to portray a life devoid of theorizing as the only sensible option. A holistic pragmatist should know better than to decide this matter beforehand.

The notion of the privacy of experimentation and the publicity of evaluation of novel cultural artifacts, an apparent dialectical relationship between the public and private spheres, also seems to fly in the face of Rorty's call for a strict separation of public and private.[64] But exploration of Rortian progress as involving novelty, utility and dynamic holism has perhaps made things clearer. Considering the public and private realms not as opposite sides of a dualism, but as co-existing, distinctive dimensions of modern life may circumvent a quick dismissal of Rorty's theory at the first sign of interaction between the two. But some of his claims about the role of philosophy and especially of metaphysical or other kinds of non-pragmatic critiques of society may be undermined by a relationship that is too symbiotic. Even a non-theoretical account of the activities contributing to progress may be subjected to criticism on practical grounds. The basic questions then become: is Rorty's distinction between public and private undermined by strategies of coping that cross this boundary? If some privately cultivated skills provide crucial means to attaining public virtues, does this not make private philosophers publicly relevant? If such thinkers *are* publicly relevant, Rorty's defence of ironism may falter.[65]

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[62] Guignon and Hilley, "Biting the Bullet", in *Reading Rorty*, p. 359.

[63] Indeed, it is one of the few aspects of Davidson's position Rorty does not explicitly endorse. One reason for this may be Rorty's emphasis on individuals' status as the bearers of pain and humiliation; despite the intersubjectivity of the sense of self, it is a particular body that will experience pain.

Upon reflection, it seems Rorty does make a firm distinction between public and private, but unfortunately, it more frequently resembles a dichotomy between mutually exclusive spheres rather than the holistic picture one would expect. This is most apparent in Rorty's discussions of the benefits of novels versus the impotence of philosophical treatises, and in his defence of the usefulness of the liberal ironist over and against that of the traditional, metaphysical liberal. The purpose behind this strict separation is primarily the praising of irony at the expense of metaphysics, and to some extent, of spirituality as well. If *Contingency* were not in part devoted to a project of persuading philosophers to change their outlook, one would expect the book to make less of the difference between the universal and particular, metaphysical and ironic, philosophical and literary, and instead focus more on the 'family resemblance' (and potential utility) of these different kinds of cultural activity.

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[64] It is worthwhile to recall, however, that progress can be in terms of either private or public needs. With a tool analogy account of moral goals in place, one does not need to fit any one activity under a unifying account of progress.

[65] It is not clear that the public relevance of ironists like Nietzsche or Heidegger dooms liberal ironism; nor does it seem likely that such thinkers would have much impact. But if they are relevant beyond personal considerations, Rorty might have to contend with other viable forms of ironism, forms that do not support his liberal stance. But Rorty--like many liberals--is reluctant to consider possible challengers to liberalism.

Chapter Three: Liberal Ironism

"Any liberalism which is not also radicalism is irrelevant and doomed."
– John Dewey

3.0 Some Comments on Criticism

I write this chapter in the first person singular partly to mark a move from exegesis to criticism, and partly to attempt to distinguish my comments from those of Rorty's numerous other commentators. It has been a source of frustration to read so many articles on Rorty, many with insightful analyses of his shortcomings, frequently based on a narrow selection of texts (understandable given Rorty's prolific nature) or exaggerated and lacking in nuance. Those texts that present Rorty's position in its complexity, on the other hand, often seem to linger at the level of platitude, as if Rorty's work could not have any tensions, and leaves no room for improvement. Such reticence is contrary to Rorty's overall goal of "continuing the conversation of the West."[1] in any fashion we might find meaningful. In the search for my own opinions on Rorty's position I have had to reject many possible sources because obvious objections sprang into mind while reading essays on his philosophy. These objections were seldom due to any great talent on my part; rather they were simply borne of having read works these critics had overlooked, or by recalling part of Rorty's position that would allow him to circumvent a perceived difficulty. In making these claims I am by no means eschewing criticism altogether--indeed, much of this final chapter involves utilizing existing criticisms of Rorty's work. But the goal is to re-situate such criticisms within a positive rather than a negative framework: I aim to show how critics can contribute to a process of extending and refining--rather than rejecting--Rorty's work as characterized by *Contingency*.

As I have tried to show, I believe Rorty's position to be by and large a coherent one; furthermore, it is comprised of many ideas rather intricately woven together. While Rorty may be vague in his language, his views are not the result of intellectual laziness: they appear to fit together much more closely than many will concede. The coherence of Rorty's rejection of traditional philosophy and the coherence of his pragmatic, anti-foundational and historicist views means that traditional philosophical criticism, in my view, is not the right way to approach Rorty's writings. I believe it is more effective to represent his views accurately and, as much as possible, in their entirety, and from there, to proceed to find areas where Rorty does not live up to his own expectations. The most interesting problems that confront him emerge from endorsing his views, not questioning their veracity, or hunting for logical inconsistencies. Given Rorty's valuing of the creation of a 'strong reading' of past writers, even a traditional scholarly criticism, where one judges Rorty by his accuracy of interpreting past texts (a technique I very much favour) is not, in and of itself, satisfactory. He has merely to fall back upon the claim that he is attempting to effect a paradigm shift in philosophy to circumvent criticisms of his exegeses and lines of inference.

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[1] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 394.

As important as it is to maintain some distance between Rorty's views and one's own, it is not obvious that the severer critics of Rorty have had much effect, either in persuading Rorty to change his position or in promoting disenchantment amongst his readers[2]. This is not due to belligerence on Rorty's part, but rather to the frequency and depth of misinterpretation of his views by critics. One can reject Rorty's entire project, or criticize its philosophical presuppositions, only to be rebuffed, quite legitimately, as missing Rorty's point or relying on views he feels he has discredited. Accusing Rorty of ignoring problems he considers better left ignored is not criticism, but miscommunication. Only from a position of relative strength, where author and critic can come to terms, can criticism of an author be taken to heart; criticism is best based on an author's intentions and self-understanding. From there one can legitimately accuse a writer of not living up to his or her own designs. This has been the point behind the two previous, predominantly expository, chapters, and it is with a detailed understanding of Rorty's picture of the ironist liberal in hand that one may begin to ask questions that may illuminate tensions, gaps or undesirable lapses that exist within Rorty's vision of liberal life.

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[2] Alessandro Ferrara's "the unbearable seriousness of irony" *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 16(1990) is the best example I can find of how uncharitable interpretation undermines criticism. Ferrara concludes that Rorty's rejection of foundationalism prevents him from making any positive suggestions for politics or philosophy, and thus his endorsement of liberal ironism leads him into contradiction. In other words, in rejecting foundationalism, Rorty should have known better than to talk about ethics. Overlooking how a pragmatist can recommend a course of action without an account of universal validity undermines Ferrara's attempt to point out some genuine shortcomings of Rorty's views. Not taking Rorty's pragmatism on its own terms deprived Ferrara's criticisms of Rorty's account of the self of whatever force they might have had. See pp. 103-5; Cf. p. 99 for Ferrara's critique of Rorty's account of the self. For an in-depth exegesis of Rorty's views that remains in the laudatory rather than critical voice, see Konstantin Kolenda's Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism.

I am willing to assume, then, that Rorty's picture of a liberal ironist is viable. That is, I feel that it is possible for a person to be both someone who cherishes the values of liberalism while entertaining a certain ironic distance from his or her convictions. But perhaps 'distance' is the wrong metaphor, for irony does not isolate one's values from one's self; in the case of the liberal ironist, it appears that recognition of one's contingency, of the fallibility of all value schemes, leads one to tolerate differing value systems, treating others with respect, and in the public sphere, describing them in their own terms.[3] Believing in the possibility of being a liberal ironist as described by Rorty, leads me then to ask the following questions that seem to flow from this position. They are, in a sense, the 'tough' questions for the liberal ironist. These questions are about Rorty's characterization of private fulfillment, and more generally of the liberal ironist, and, finally, whether metaphysics, as he construes it, is really such a pernicious academic enterprise. I form these criticisms with the assistance of available criticism, but by no means do these constitute the most common lines of critical thought in the (by now rather large) community of scholars interested in Rorty's thought. What I have managed to collect here as a means of concluding this essay is simply a menagerie of existing comments designed to spawn a new line of engaged, critical thinking about Rorty.

3.1 The Good Life

It is Rorty's interpretation of the private realm of life in the liberal utopia that is, for me, the first cause of concern. In his account of the search for 'private perfection' his views of the self, progress and history combine with some dissatisfying results. These are, I believe, the result of his attempt to combine a polemic on the contemporary character of philosophy with an edifying account of how philosophy and culture might interact (which I briefly sketched in chapter two). An exploration of this unnecessarily limiting picture of private life may lead us to safely reject his polemical project, in favour of broadening his positive vision. (Such a revision would, I believe, employ Rorty's technique of 'changing the subject' in a more extensive manner than he has hitherto).

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[3] I attempted to elucidate this point in chapter two, where I discuss the notion of irony as linked to a 'way of seeing things.' See section 2.2, pp. 68-72.

Rorty offers his first, and most succinct definition of private perfection in his introduction, where he identifies the goal of private striving as "a self-created, autonomous human life." (xiv) Elsewhere he offers similar characterizations of private, poetic endeavours as centered around a quest for autonomy, but this claim often appears more extensive than Rorty would (in all likelihood) require for his stated purpose of giving an account of liberalism without foundations. Consider his comments at 97: "He [the theorizing ironist] is just doing the same thing which all ironists do--attempting autonomy." This need not seem all encompassing: after all, Rorty generally rejects the notion that a theory of human nature is possible, let alone desired. But he expands this claim about what ironists do when he comments on their project of creating good lives. He states that

> The generic trait of ironists is that they do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves. This means that their criterion for resolving doubts, their criterion of private perfection, is autonomy rather than affiliation to a power other than themselves. All any ironist can measure success against is the past--not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms, thereby becoming able to say, "Thus I willed it." (ibid.)

It is unfortunate that Rorty resorts to a simple either/or choice in this passage. Autonomy and 'affiliation to a power outside oneself' need not occupy opposite sides of a dichotomy. However, this is not an isolated lapse on his part. It is, rather, part of Rorty's larger view of history, which (like Bloom's) is predicated on a certain antagonistic or 'rebellious' brand of historicism, where it is the task of each new generation to struggle with, redescribe, and thereby overcome the vocabularies inherited from its ancestors. It is a view rife with 'anxiety of influence.'[4]

Returning to Bloom might be helpful here. In *The Anxiety of Influence,* Bloom employs Freud in a far more extensive, and far less subtle manner than Rorty does in *Contingency*. But whereas Rorty thinks of Freud as someone who helped us jettison notions like 'human nature' and 'the self', Bloom borrows Freud's (largely discredited) notion of Oedipal struggle: all human creativity (action) is an effort to overcome reverence for one's ancestors. It is odd to find Rorty's pluralistic, ironic liberalism based in part upon such a reductive account of human activity. I found this particularly unsettling in his reading of Philip Larkin's poem "Continuing to Live", which Rorty thinks owes its strength to its "reminder of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (25). It is worthwhile to reproduce the stanzas appearing in *Contingency* in order to scrutinize Rorty's interpretation of them:

> And once you have walked the length of your mind, what
> You command is clear as a lading-list.
> Anything else must not, for you, be thought
>   To exist.
>
> And what's the profit? Only that, in time,
> We half-identify the blind impress
> All our behavings bear, may trace it home.
>   But to confess,
>
> On that green evening when our death begins,
> Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,
> Since it applied only to one man once,
>   And that one dying.

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[4] It is also a view that seems to depend on an 'emancipatory' view of freedom--where freedom is characterized as freedom from others. This is a view Rorty explicitly rejects in his critique of Lyotard in his "Cosmopolitanism without emancipation: A response to Jean-François Lyotard" in ORT. See especially his comments at 215-6. It therefore seems uncharacteristic of Rorty to characterize autonomy in a radical, isolated way after spending so much of his time arguing both for 'cosmopolitanism' (which combines freedom with solidarity) and 'irony'--which seems to preclude serious brow-knitting over the question of whether one's self-description occurs in a vocabulary fashioned by someone else.

Rorty sees Larkin as writing "a poem about the unsatisfactoriness, compared with what pre-Nietzschean philosophers hoped to do, of doing the only thing that poets can do." (26) Larkin's poem does appear to be about self-knowledge, and it does call the value of that knowledge into question. But from this Rorty infers that Larkin is comparing it to some sort of universal knowledge.[5] He thus performs a 'strong reading' of Larkin that puts his poem in the service of a Rortian narrative about the futility and false hope of metaphysical speculation.

It is one thing to question the value of self-knowledge and quite another to decide self-knowledge is valueless in comparison with some kind of metaphysics. Yet both have something to do with contingency, and one's attitude toward it. One can question the value of 'walking the length of one's mind' as Larkin does because that mind is a finite entity, and such knowledge will be short-lived. And, as Larkin points out, life is more like chess than poker, where in the latter you can learn from your past mistakes when a new hand is dealt and everyone starts anew. In chess, your mistakes stay with you, and what you can do depends very much on those contingent errors, miscues and incorrect assumptions that contribute to your present fortunes.[6] Self-knowledge is for this reason called into question by the poet, who reflects (with some irony) on how one learns how to live only after life's course has been run, "On that green evening when our death begins".

Both Bloom and Rorty characterize strong poetry, the quest to 'come to grips' with one's own contingency, as a quest for individuation or recreating one's relationship to the past, whether the self in question considers this to be his or her goal (as Proust perhaps did), or like Freud, they characterize it as something quite different, such as scientific research. Whatever the author's intention, he or she is trying to overcome a fear of dying, a fear of being merely a copy or a replica of what has come before. No strong poet, according to Rorty and Bloom, wants to live in an inherited world, or to describe her life in someone else's terms. The good life and the independent life are one and the same, although both Rorty and Bloom acknowledge that absolute autonomy is not realizable. One cannot help being contextualized by one's epigones (even if, like Heidegger or Derrida, one makes it extremely hard for them to do so) as Rorty frequently reminds us.

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[5] Rorty makes this move--which he then attributes to Larkin--at 26.

[6] Referring to life's inevitable losses, Larkin muses: "Ah, if the game were poker, yes,/You might discard them, draw a full house!/But it's chess." It is this stanza (which Rorty omits) that suggests to my mind that Larkin's regret centers around the futility of self-knowledge rather than its adequacy in the face of metaphysical philosophy (a very pragmatic attitude indeed). This interpretation, incidentally, adheres to the principle of interpretive economy more than Rorty's, which presumes Larkin's interest in the Philosophy/Poetry quarrel. The excerpts from "Continuing to Live" are from Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, London: Faber & Faber, 1988. p. 94.

Despite what looks like the impossibility of attaining absolute autonomy, the task of self-creation remains an important one for Rorty. But to struggle for what cannot be achieved is an unusual position for a pragmatist, to put it lightly. And this prompts me to ask: *Is this search for autonomy itself a kind of 'transcendental urge'?* If it is, then Rorty faces serious difficulties. I am not convinced this is the case, nor do I feel capable of defending such a position. However, for Rorty ironic autonomy is contrasted with identification to an order beyond time and chance through the metaphysical search for the true order of things. If a similarity between the striving for autonomy and the metaphysical urge is evident, this might serve as a strong motive to jettison Rorty's account of the self for a more pluralistic model. In other words, if the distance is between irony and metaphysics is not so great (which I tried to show in the previous chapter), there might be all the more reason to explore the interesting terrain in between.

Let me just make a few more comments about the problems of this type of historicism. On Rorty's view, living well involves the attempt to free oneself from one's past and one's inherited situation. While this has parallels with his liberalism--where the extension of freedom replaces the search for truth, it relies, I believe, on a very questionable interpretation of what is meant by 'freedom' and 'tradition'. It is an attitude towards history that is very modern, a view Charles Taylor calls 'exceptionalist': the view that one must escape one's past, distinguish oneself from one's inherited situation, and overcome history by improving upon it.[7] It is an attitude towards history closely linked with the modern notion of progress, and not an attitude indicative of historicism as such (thus, one might reject Rorty's exceptionalism without jettisoning historicism). Basically, I would argue that Rorty's characterization of private perfection as the search for autonomy is based on an account of freedom he rejects (see above, note 4), and a variant of historicism that either is at odds with classical pragmatism, or runs the risk of reducing the distinction between 'creating' versus 'discovering' to a trivial one.

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[7] Interestingly, Taylor's claim that an exceptionalist view of history is uniquely modern finds support from Bloom, who tailors his theory of anxiety of influence to post-Shakespearean poetry: "Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness." Bloom, *Op. Cit.*, 11.

As I see it, the exceptionalist or Oedipal historicism envisioned by Rorty poses a straightforward problem of utility for the pragmatic liberal. While the prioritizing of novelty is an important buttress against conservatism (in the sense that one does not give preference to the way things currently are) it does devalue what has come before for simply not being novel. (Rorty simply inverts the problem of political inertia by placing the *avant garde* in the treasured position once held by the *status quo*.) Important avenues of exploration may be closed off, or old resources overlooked, simply because of this lack of novelty. Thus Rorty's dynamic progress may not be best served by an attitude that emphasizes overcoming the past, or redescribing it in one's own terms. Rorty assumes this is an intrinsically valuable exercise, sidestepping the question of whether the terms of an older vocabulary are in some cases effective; he also overlooks the question of whether re-description is in some cases ineffective and distracts one from more practical issues.[8]

It has occurred to me that my interpretation of Rorty's views on autonomy might be too narrow: he could after all be striving for an account of political progress that takes the best of both old and new. His emphasis on the historicity of philosophy supports this, for it is the historical perspective that forms the starting point for revising problematic vocabularies (xiii; 3; 198): presumably historical knowledge could be among the resources used to effect change. But if one attempts to interpret autonomy in a non-exceptionalist way, that is, if one assumes Rorty's rhetoric can be interpreted in a broad fashion that incorporates many types of historicism, one encounters a similar tension between this historicism and liberal pragmatism. Autonomy ceases to make a difference: the distinction between 'creating' and 'discovering' freedom (or anything else) becomes a trivial one.

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[8] In the case of Philosophy, Rorty does argue that stagnation has set in, and that a new vocabulary is needed (see his introduction to ORT, as well as *Contingency* 8-9). But in his description of the good life, the redescriptive capabilities of the ironist are considered inherently useful. This neglects the extent to which such activity can be counter-productive. The prioritizing of some forms of discourse which Rorty opposes (discussed at 75 above) may pose a problem for him when it is the novel, ironic form of discourse which is prioritized. This is, I think, another example of how Rorty's polemical and positive projects work at cross-purposes.

For an historicist like Taylor, progress results from getting back in touch with parts of the Western tradition(s) that help people lead good lives. Rorty's constant emphasis on improvement, freeing oneself from the past (as well as his bellicose attitude towards religion and metaphysics) blind him to the possible uses of past ways of thinking. When he does appropriate something, such as Christian ethics, it is subjected to a 'strong reading' that doubtless fits some modern needs, but fails to take the subject matter in its original context seriously, which in a sense prevents the reader from being 'shook up' in the manner fitting a dynamic model of progress. Part of this model of self-improvement and progress involves cultivating the skill of seeing things from differing points of view. The act of describing people in their own terms should be extended to artifacts like cultures and traditions for no other reason than the pedagogical one of reminding an interpreter to be open to revising one's world-view, even in a very radical or fundamental way. It seems to me that the technique of 'strong reading' inhibits this.[9] It is difficult to see how one can learn to look at the world differently if one interprets and appropriates the past in such a safe fashion. If Rorty's talk of autonomy is merely a shift in terms (thus rendering Rorty's historicism consistent with conservatives like T. S. Eliot) then the value of this move from the point of view of pragmatism or liberalism is highly questionable.

In addition to favouring the new over the old, this picture of the good life also betrays a certain aesthetic preference: that of novelty and grandeur, in a manner following Nietzsche, that is perhaps at odds with liberalism or a life of civic virtue. The very fact that Rorty exhibits a preference is troubling for the task at hand; while a liberal need not be silent on matters of taste, he should at least tolerate several tastes rather than endorsing one as the liberal ideal. As Richard Shusterman recognizes, "Among the multiplicity of genres of the aesthetic life which Rorty fails to recognize there are surely some which prefer order, grace and harmony to opulence, radical change and novelty."[10] Shusterman further claims "Rorty's central mistake is to construe the need for 'tolerance' of ambiguities and alternative narratives as the need for 'celebration and maximization' of such things."[11] In this I believe Shusterman is largely right. Though in defence of Rorty, such maximization might be called for by his dynamic holism--part of the quest to avoid stagnation. But, this in turn seems to stem from Rorty's highly confrontational account of history (Cf. Larkin, Bloom) which is at odds with his notion of cosmopolitan freedom. His account of private perfection seems rather transcendental, actually, as the good life is frequently construed as some kind of escape from one's 'original position' which transforms the bourgeois liberal into the (partially) self-made being.

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[9] While there may be no 'objective reading' to oppose a strong reading, there are nevertheless possibilities of interpretation that do not subvert object to subject in as blatant a manner as Rorty advocates. In the search for self-perfection, a 'humble reading' may in fact be more useful than a 'strong reading.'

This raises the larger question of whether Rorty's metaphorics for personal fulfillment are compatible with his progressive liberalism. Two recent--and very different--essays address this question and open the range of possibilities unexplored by Rorty, extending the realm of liberal ironism into very familiar territory. In "Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality", Guignon and Hilley point to the problem of how Rorty's treatment of private fulfillment and public liberalism cohere. Their assessment of his characterization of private morality as self-enlargement is that Rorty believes such a view "comports best with our liberal democratic ideals; that is, our commitment to an open society understood as an arena for expressing divergent views, trying out new ideas, and blending conflicting values."[12] (p. 354) Guignon and Hilley, employing a brand of historicism that does not appear 'exceptionalist' in the manner of Rorty's historicism, argue for a different conception of private perfection:

> Recognizing our 'situated freedom' and our historicity, our task

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[10] Richard Shusterman, "Postmodernist Aestheticism: A New Moral Philosophy?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 5 (1988), p. 348.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 354n8.

[12] Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hilley, "Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality" in *Reading Rorty*, p. 354.

> is seen as critically evaluating our current commitments in the light of the possibilities laid out by the past in order to articulate meaningful goals for the future. And this task, it could be argued, is better undertaken by individuals who take self-focusing rather than self-enlargement as their character-ideal.[13]

The trade-off here, as I see it, is increased coherence with liberal pluralism for decreased coherence with Rorty's notion of progress. Taking self-focusing as an alternative goal to self-enlargement may jeopardize the dynamic holism required for maximising moral progress. However, as progress seems to play a descriptive rather than a proscriptive role (as elucidated in chapter two, above) in Rorty's theory, this might seem a fair trade. I would prefer to put the case for self-focusing more strongly and suggest that broadening the palette from which to fashion a good life constitutes a significant instance of moral progress from the liberal point of view. Increasing the number of viable models for fashioning one's life makes for a more pluralistic world-view; on this view, refraining from the temptation to subsume all life plans under a metaphoric of self-enlargement constitutes a meaningful act of toleration: no insignificant deed for the liberal.

In his essay "The Disconsolation of Philosophy: Rorty, Shklar and Putting Charity First"[14], Timothy Jackson puts forth a viable alternative to Rorty's vision of the good life. Simply put, Jackson replaces Rortian autonomy with a de-divinized version of Christian charity as the hub of a flourishing, ironist existence. He retrieves the religious option Rorty thinks is unavailable for the majority of Western liberals, strips it of supernaturalism, and constructs a coherent narrative where *caritas* forms the basis for a life of ironic curiosity and liberal aversion of cruelty. But his model goes further, for Jackson's "strong agapism" denotes an attitude where concern for others constitutes the center of one's ethical life, a view where the demands of the public and the private are not separate.[15] Jackson can do this because he does not write off 'the religious option' as antiquated or oppressive: he, like Rorty, retrieves the side of Christianity that reduces suffering. But where Rorty sees the spiritual drive as akin to the 'metaphysical urge', Jackson sees this drive as a source of humility and piety that may aid the liberal project. His view also circumvents the quietism or lack of involvement that can accompany an individualistic ethos. Moreover, Jackson calls into question the adequacy of Rorty's irony with respect to his own liberal goals: "Rorty fails to appreciate (1) the extent to which love admits fallibility and pluralistic visions of the good and (2) the extent to which irony fails to support and may actually undermine the sort of solidarity he cherishes."[16] Jackson calls into question Rorty's gratuitous linking of religion and metaphysics and shows how his vision of charity is just as anti-foundationalist as Rorty's ironist:

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[13] "Biting the Bullet", p. 361.

[14] Timothy P. Jackson, "The Disconsolation of Theology: Irony, Cruelty, and Putting Charity First" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol. 20(1) Spring 1992.

[15] Jackson discusses *caritas* at 2, and introduces the term "strong agapism" at 1. See also p. 28. While Jackson does not emphasize the personal, ironic aspects of a life centered around charity, neither does he explicitly eliminate it from his account of the good life. In Jackson's thrust is against what he sees as the "pervasive" irony Rorty advocates (4). Cf. p. 9-10.

> Charity is like irony in being beyond foundationalist claims to certitude, but in charity's case this is not because there is no truth or falsity to love's beliefs about God and the created order. Love is beyond certainty in that its knowledge of others is premised on its free commitment to them rather than on incorrigible apprehensions of logically necessary deductions.[17]

Jackson's charity seems to meet Rorty's anti-foundationalist criteria. But in contrast to the Rortian ideal of self-augmentation and playful ironic curiosity, Jackson's picture of the self may better serve Rorty's anti-foundationalist aims, for as the former points out "Self-criticism, not pure irony, is the remedy for epistemic hubris."[18]

Jackson's account of the good life has the added advantage of providing an alternative to our current lifestyle of extreme consumption, individualism and (some would argue) narcissism.[19] Even if narcissism is part of the lay of the land, Rorty need not pander to current tastes given his account of--and professed desire for--moral progress.[20] Guignon and Hilley touch on this possibility briefly: "One risk here is that such a life style [of 'private narcissism'] might tend to aggravate certain underlying tensions and problems in our contemporary society." They continue, highlighting a 'malaise of Modernity' (to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase) that autonomy-centered ironism might not be able to handle: "The upshot has been…a 'culture of narcissism' tending towards social fragmentation, lack of sustaining commitment, cynicism, privatism and self-preoccupation." Contrary to Rorty's view that this malaise is due to Enlightenment ways of thinking, they argue "it seems more likely that Rorty's vision of a culture devoted to a 'spirit of playfulness and irony' would exacerbate rather than resolve disorders of the self."[21] It seems then that there is reason to consider alternatives to Rorty's brand of ironism.

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[16] Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 29. Cf. his comments at 7: "What Rorty objects to is, in fact, not so much moral realism as epistemic foundationalism, not so much religious faith as head-strong rationalism."

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[19] Catherine Wilson explores this world-view (and its unnecessary truncation of the moral dimension of our lives) in "Some Alleged Limits to Moral Endeavour" *Journal of Philosophy*, June 1993.

Once again, stoicism might be a good ideal against which to balance Rorty's picture of the good life--similar enough to ironism, yet it opens the field to notions of self-focusing, or integration with one's traditions, etc. without sacrificing progressive liberalism. However, ironism seems to preclude the notion of a single conception of the human good, as Rorty is fond of reminding us. Thus, my criticism of his account of the human good as autonomy can be circumvented by Rorty by denying the primacy of any one description of the human good. I believe that ironism--and especially liberal ironism--requires such detachment from one's characterizations of human lives.

3.2 The Breadth of the Ironic Viewpoint

Ironic playfulness and liberal pluralism seem especially well suited to one another. Thus Rorty's joining of the two in *Contingency* makes a great deal of sense to me, and the playful interaction of these two views--one new, one old--provides me with a way to synthesize (pragmatically, not theoretically) my own ironist curiosities and liberal convictions. The playfulness Rorty encourages allows one to circumvent difficulties of a metaphysical nature (such as the question 'why is liberalism still viable after the debunking of its metaphysical roots?') while maintaining strong beliefs about how the public affairs of one's society should be conducted. But parts of Rorty's narrative unsettle me, and I find that while I accept many of Rorty's suggestions for revising our approach to politics and philosophy, I cannot accept his critique of metaphysics and his claim that we must 'overcome' the metaphysical urge and describe everything we find in our own terms as opposed to the terms used by others. I think that the best recourse when confronted with such doubts about Rorty's polemical comments is to subject them to the same sort of ironic, playful manipulation he employs throughout *Contingency*. As an example, I need look no further than my own marginal notes in Rorty's book.

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[20] Here Rorty is singularly pessimistic about the ability of Westerners to abjure this lifestyle. See his comments in "Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future" in EHO. Cf. "Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein"

[21] Guignon and Hilley, "Biting the Bullet", p. 356.

He states at 97 that ironists' "criterion for resolving doubts, their criterion of private perfection, is *autonomy* rather than affiliation to a power other than themselves." (emphasis added) The first question is why autonomy is preferable to affiliation: affiliation to others, for example, may foster the kind of intersubjectivity required for good lives.[22] But to get involved in a debate over the merits of either side of this dichotomy is to get sidetracked into a debate the ironist is ill-suited for: like the debate between objectivity and relativism, it may force one to choose between extremes neither of which appears tenable. The question is not whether one side or the other should be the model of a human life, but whether such a dichotomy is warranted by our discussions about morality. Thus the dichotomy itself, and not its content, is called into question. It does not seem necessary to oppose autonomy with affiliation, as individuals are capable of leading good lives while experiencing some degree of both. One may experience autonomy in some spheres of life, but it is not clear that to attempt maximum autonomy is some kind of moral imperative; neither is it obvious that having a self-image that is explicitly interpersonal is some kind of moral failing. But this dichotomy between autonomy and affiliation is more than questionable; it is an avoidable and unnecessary hindrance to the ironist's attempts at moral reflection. To construe such perspectives on selfhood as inharmonious creates an avoidable philosophical obstacle and limits the liberal ironist's options.

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[22] For that matter, affiliation to non-human entities has not been shown to be harmful. Rorty states at 40 that both persons and the world "have power over us--for example, the power to kill us." and goes on to suggest that we de-divinize our attitudes towards the world. But affiliation to powers not ourselves does not amount, in my opinion, to worship or to treating parts of the world as supernatural. Rorty's preoccupation with private 'self-augmentation' runs the risk of precluding careful attention to the non-human powers that affect our lives. The key liberal virtue of humility may well be fostered by consideration of the limited and contextual aspects of one's life; Rorty's focus on autonomy may jeopardize such a moral endeavour.

A better way to approach this passage of Rorty's is simply to *play* with it. When thinking about whether autonomy is the 'criterion for private perfection', try substituting 'humility' for 'autonomy'; if it seems to fit, if it seems possible to form a viable picture of an ironist with this new criterion, then search for others. Try plugging 'happiness', 'peace' or even 'unification' into this equation. None should be ruled out *a priori.* On the contrary, until one engages in a detailed critique of modern society (from which certain candidates may be found wanting), each has a prima facie claim to validity or adequacy as a criterion for human flourishing.

This ironic manipulation leads to a rather commonplace conclusion for the liberal: simply refrain from offering any detailed conception of the good life. Allow instead the maximum amount of freedom for individuals to explore and realize the possibilities they encounter. To this end, I believe metaphysics should be included in the menu of options available to the liberal ironist as a resource for self-exploration and perhaps even for political debate and exchange. To make a stronger claim, I believe metaphysics has more than a prima facie claim to usefulness; I believe it has important pedagogical and practical roles to play in the life of the liberal ironist. I therefore find myself at odds with Rorty's conclusions in Chapter five of *Contingency*, where he denies such a role, and I further disagree with his characterization of 'metaphysics', especially regarding its role in the moral life.

3.3 Metaphysics Reconsidered

Michael Hodges, in "The Ontological Project Considered: The Displacement of Theoretical by Practical Unity"[23] sums up the prospects for an ironist who thinks about metaphysics, in a passage that sounds eerily directed at Rorty:

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[23] *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXX, No. 1.

> All this "reconstruction of philosophy" might finally lead to a reexamination of a good deal in the history of philosophy, looking at traditional metaphysical thinkers as contributors to the ongoing process of cultural critique and reorgainization. [sic] The point is not to attack the "metaphysical truth" of their positions but to examine the various claims made from the point of view of practice. Do they open the possibility of transformations which lead to richer and more satisfying experience? Do they make possible more stable satisfying experiences? Do they offer ways for discourses to work together to unify experience into a satifactory [sic] whole, or do they tend to compartmentalize and reduce particular stretches of experiences for the sake of others? There are various possibilities, and there is no need to prejudge the outcome of such discussions. (42)

Such an attitude towards metaphysics, where systems are considered pragmatically, for their pedagogical value (as 'reminders for a particular purpose') is one Rorty would do well to adopt. His major fault, as I see it, is his attempt to combine a polemic against one side of the philosophy/literature dichotomy (or the science/poetry one, or the metaphysics/ironism one) with an edifying vision of a culture that no longer relies on such invidious comparisons. I think it would be wiser for Rorty to abandon the attempt to invert the perceived hierarchical distinction (in the manner in which Marx inverted Hegel, or Nietzsche inverted Plato) and to focus instead on a philosophical vision that comports better with his liberalism and his pragmatism. This means adopting a pluralistic stance not only to other people (and their public and private projects and vocabularies) but to cultural activities like literature and science, including metaphysics, which, if one abandons Rorty's rather strict caricature of it (and after all, an ironist should not read Nietzsche--whom Rorty reads as offering a metaphysical theory--any more seriously than Nietzsche took his own work!) is guilty solely for being reflexive in a manner which some cultural activities are not. This is what Rorty calls 'offering a metanarrative', but is, I think, better understood as offering either a narrative about one's own narrating (or that of others: thus, simply a 'second-order' narrative) or offering a narrative of something larger than a single human life, for example, inherited canons of philosophical, literary or political greats.[24] (Recall that Rorty holds up Proust's autobiographical novel as the epitome of ironist narrative: see 106-7; 120) It is easier to consider metaphysics as socially useful once one collapses the distinction between *Ideologiekritik* and *Kulturkritik*, and I take this to be part of Hodges' point above. Rorty disregards the possibility of useful metaphysics almost from the start, just as Bloom discounts the possibility of non-Oedipal poetry, and both of these moves betray the non-dualistic thinking Rorty generally encourages.

3.4 Conclusion

Having considered the objections of others, and pulled them together to make a few positive suggestions for revising Rorty's liberalism, I can now put forward my own central misgiving about *Contingency* in order to reiterate my recommendations and further buttress my critique of liberal ironism. I have already said that an autonomy-centered life need not be the only model for the ironist liberal; I have also claimed that an antagonistic or competitive brand of historicism may not help the liberal cause as much as Rorty thinks it does. My last claim is that these two points lead me to conclude that the autonomy model is not a good basis for liberal ironism: in my view, this model exacerbates the very tendencies Rorty is trying to circumvent: the tendencies in Western thought to struggle against the contingency and historicity of aspects of our selves, our languages and our communities.

In addition to prolonging the debate over the role of theory, such narcissism (if I may call it such) also exacerbates the individualistic ethos that makes changing public policy so difficult in the Western democracies. Rorty's pessimistic view of existing liberal democracies finds support in the picture of self-creation he advocates. In one stroke, this aspect of Rorty's theory undermines the very tendencies Dewey (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) warned against: a brand of liberalism that sinks either into pedantic side issues or becomes a tool preserving the status quo.

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[24] This is what Nietzsche's polemics against philosophy, Milan Kundera's *Immortality*, and the typical revisionist biography of a major political figure have in common: they all challenge us to re-consider our inherited canons: who's important, what events are worth remembering (and revering) and what books best shape our moral consciousness. Viewed in this light, even a metaphysical system, like Descartes' *Meditations*, is an attempt to break away from an inherited (in this case, a Scholastic) way of thinking.

Rorty must choose between his polemical project and his positive vision for philosophy. I have made it clear where my preference lies. A more playful and less dismissive enquiry can be made of the subjects raised by Rorty, such as the difference between ironism and metaphysics, philosophy and literature, liberalism and pragmatism, and our own tendencies towards scrutinizing our selves and our history. These entities should be explored without giving in to the tendencies either to set them up in opposition to one another, nor to reduce one to the terms of the other.

The attempt to fashion an autonomous life (given Rorty's views of language use, culture, etc.), is as futile as the attempt to transcend one's contingency through metaphysics. Each seems to be an unnecessary attempt to escape one's time and place; but Rorty advocates autonomy: he sees it as an important quest and (in some sense) an achievable goal. Furthermore, this goal has its drawbacks, while metaphysics (according to Hodges, for example) may be less of a threat (and more useful) than he thinks. Rorty's book is as useful a model as any of the works he condemns as metaphysical, and it exhibits a structure that seems--except for its irreverent character--not unlike many of the works that constituted past attempts to move philosophical conversations in a new direction. The paradox for Rorty is, the more explicit his polemic against metaphysics becomes, the more his work exhibits the very features (such as a theory of human nature, a prioritizing of discourse) he scorns. With respect to the large and varied debate over Rorty's writings, Andrew Wicks has pointed out that "perhaps the greatest irony or this controversy is that Rorty's efforts have allowed discourse about theory to take priority over consideration of practice."[25] But Rorty does more than move the conversation in a more theoretical direction; he blurs the distinction between metaphysics and ironism, the distinction upon which his polemic depends. This is one more instance where his holistic impulses undermine a rhetorical dualism, where his campaign against dogmatic Philosophy falters on the very principles supporting his pragmatism, where his foray into political philosophy only opens the door to a continuing conversation of true richness and diversity. It is my opinion that Rorty's contribution to the field will have been a lasting one if his readers can see his work for what it is, including, most importantly, its limitations, and build upon his work without subscribing to the temptation to take Rorty's word as the final one on the subject of liberal ironism.

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[25] Andrew Wicks, "Divide and Conquer? Rorty's Distinction Between The Public and The Private" *Soundings* Vol. LXXVI, No. 4, Winter 1993 p. 563.

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